

Bibliophile Princess: Volume 3

Yui

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Bibliophile Princess

3



Author: Yui

Illustrator: Satsuki Sheena

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Elianna

Prince Christopher's fiancée and the daughter of a marquess. She loves books so much it has earned her the nickname "Bibliophile Princess." Years ago, she was also known as the "Library Ghost," so she actually much prefers the new one.

Christopher

Crown Prince of the Sauslind Kingdom. He's Elianna's betrothed and loves her dearly. His feelings are often so strong they rage out of control, but he is normally very noble and wise. He has a promising future ahead of him.

Bibliophile Princess



Character Profiles



Alexei

Heir to an earldom and the prince's reliable right-hand man. He is equally frigid toward any women who approach, which has earned him the epithet, "Ice Scion."



Glen

Part of the prince's inner circle. He's a knight in the imperial guard as well as the prince's bodyguard. Often finds himself the victim of the prince's misdirected frustration and anger.



Alan

Master court musician that serves the prince. Per His Highness's orders, he is secretly shadowing Elianna for her protection.



Theodore

Younger brother of the reigning king of Sauslind and Christopher's uncle. He's a popular and charismatic man in the prime of his life but is still single.



Henrietta

Queen of Sauslind Kingdom and mother of Prince Christopher. A woman with a strict personality that has high standards for herself and others.

Series Dictionary

Bernstein Family

A line famous for its generations of book lovers. Because of their lack of interest in political power, they are generally regarded as a weaker house, but they are secretly referred to as Sauslind's Brain. A very important family. When they last appeared out in the open and assisted during a previous king's reign, the country flourished.

Miseral Dukedom

An ally to the southwest of Sauslind. Known as a maritime nation.

Maldura

A neighboring country of Sauslind. Known as a war-mongering state.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustration

Character Profiles

Arc 1: The Butterflies' Dance

Chapter 1: The Queen's Conditions

Chapter 2: Budding Seed

Chapter 3: The Butterflies' Intentions

Chapter 4: Pests

Chapter 5: Her True Feelings

Chapter 6: The Piglet's Beloved Dimples

Chapter 7: The Holy Night's Banquet

Chapter 8: Promises Made in Winter

Arc 2: Race of the Social Outcasts

Contender #1 - The Chief Herbalist

Contender #2 - Herb Researchers

Contender #3 - The Shadow Bodyguard,
Scarecrow

Contender #4 - Prince Christopher

Contender #5 - Queen Henrietta, the
Anomaly

Final Runner - The True Dark Horse

Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

About J-Novel Club

Arc 1: The Butterflies' Dance

Chapter 1: The Queen's Conditions

“...a grave situation.”

It was early afternoon. Outside, winter's harsh grasp was tightening around the kingdom. I, however, was currently seated in Prince Christopher's office where the usual crowd had gathered together.

A man with boyish features and honey-colored hair, Lord Alan, was performing maintenance on one of his instruments. The Holy Night's Banquet was fast approaching and he spoke of performing his own musical program for the occasion.

Lord Alexei, a black-haired man with a chilly exterior, shuffled through documents as he responded to the conversation.

The owner of the office, Prince Christopher, was a man with dazzling blond hair and cloudless, sky-blue eyes. His gaze fell to his desk, where he was grappling with mountains of documents awaiting his approval.

Meanwhile I, Elianna Bernstein, occupied my usual seat.

I was immersed in my reading when another voice cut into the conversation, one belonging to the commander of the imperial guard's second division. He was a knight with red hair, named Lord Glen Eisenach. There was a sober tone to his voice as he pronounced, “...a grave situation,” causing all those present in the room to blink in surprise.

“Alex,” the prince interjected, “dismiss the Dorud company's statement. It's a waste of time.”

“Earl Dauner is involved in that mess,” said Lord Alexei. “If we don't lay some groundwork first, it won't be easy.”

“Our first priority is getting that bridge up over the Tessen River in the Azul Region. Give the company a seat at the bidding table. Sauslind's reputation is on the line for this project. We won't let them refuse. That will end their appeals,” His Highness said.

“The earl oversees our military. He's more interested in putting a budget request in for iron mining than bridge construction.”

“He's just an old man with outdated and detrimental opinions. He thinks it will ignite people's spirits to go to war. I say he was born in the wrong era. The only people who agree with him are the ones who didn't put in any effort to help us gain the affluence we now enjoy,” the prince declared hotly, sorting through his paperwork.

As the end of the year drew to a close, each section of the government grew busy. Even the prince, who was always diligent about keeping up with his duties, was drowning in this year's workload. Once the calendar year changed and spring came, our wedding ceremony would be upon us. That required preparations and adjustments at various levels, making this year an especially hectic one.

Forgotten amidst the chatter between Lord Alexei and the prince, Lord Glen spoke up once more. "Please, you have to listen..."

According to Glen, a certain guest from abroad—namely, someone from the maritime Miseral Dukedom—would be visiting the Eisenach family in anticipation of the Holy Night's Banquet. This family was a rather prominent general's family, much like Lord Glen's father, Earl Eisenach. The earl and this general had been family friends since their parents' generation, meaning Lord Glen couldn't weasel his way out of mingling with them.

"And which part of this is supposed to be 'grave'?" Lord Alan asked playfully, causing Lord Glen to pale.

I wondered if this was information His Highness and Lord Alexei were already privy to. Neither one of them stopped working to listen, nor did they make any comments.

"...The person who came isn't the one who normally comes to visit," Lord Glen finally managed to say.

"Haha!" Lord Alan cackled triumphantly, a teasing look in his eyes. "Let me guess, you're getting married?"

Lord Glen's face soured as he nodded.

Instantly, Lord Alan burst into laughter. "Well, congratulations, Glen! I guess you'll be the next one to tie a knot after the prince has his wedding. You really are a loyal servant, following in his footsteps like that!"

"Moron! Why do I have to be tied down just because Chris is getting himself hitched?! I have absolutely no interest in saying my vows this young!"

"It almost sounds like you're saying you haven't slept around enough and you want to play around some more first. Is that what you mean?" Lord Alan mocked.

"Say whatever you want." Lord Glen huffed. "Randy, that bastard. He must have known this was going to happen, because he said he was going to remain with his naval unit and left. Originally, this engagement was supposed to be with *him*. Why am I getting dragged into this?!"

Randy—or rather, Lord Randolph—was the youngest of the four Eisenach brothers. I'd heard that at thirteen years old he was assigned to a naval unit in the south. The two of us had never met face-to-face

before.

“Hm, still...” Lord Alan seemed to be amused, particularly because the matter didn’t involve him personally. “The only single men remaining in the Eisenach family are you and Randy. If both of your houses agree, there’s no way out of this. Isn’t it about time you pay your dues and settle down?”

Lord Glen’s face lit up with anger, as fiery red as the hair on his head. “This is no laughing matter! Why do I have to agree to an arrangement with a ten-year-old kid?!”

His reaction elicited another round of cackling from Lord Alan, who must have already expected that response. I just blinked in surprise.

Apparently, General Eisenach had been close to the former general of the Miseral Dukedom, but now that title had passed on to the man’s son. Thus, it was the former general’s granddaughter whose hand was being offered to Lord Glen.

“Anyway,” continued Lord Glen, “my mother is the one who is really pushing this. She keeps saying how she always wanted an adorable daughter. She said the same thing when my older brothers married, though. How many daughters-in-law does she need before she’ll be satisfied?! If she wants a daughter that badly, she and my father should just have at it and make one.”

“Hey now, Glen, don’t start your family planning right here in the prince’s office,” Lord Alan teased.

“This is the defining moment that will determine the rest of my life! Besides, what the heck am I supposed to do with a ten-year-old girl as my partner?!”

“Well, if you did do anything, it would be a crime.”

“That’s *not* what I meant,” he hissed back at our court’s master musician. “I’m saying I prefer mature women. You know, one who is slender with curves in the right places, a fairly normal preference to have. Just think what will happen if I take a kid as my betrothed. Everyone in Luna, the red light district, would give me the cold shoulder. All the married women I’ve been intimate with as well! I can already imagine what they will say. ‘You lavished us with praise, calling us goddesses of beauty, but that’s not where your true preferences lie. You like them young and immature—angelic cherubs!’” He lamented as if his own destruction was drawing near.

I blinked some more, stunned at the depth of his attachment toward women.



Lord Alan opened his mouth to continue ridiculing Lord Glen when a sharp, albeit quiet sound echoed through the room. All eyes turned to the prince. He had slapped his feather pen down on his desk and turned a silencing smile toward his two bickering retainers. "Glen, Alan. The exit's over there."

Was I the only one who felt like he was indirectly telling them to "get out"?

For the first time, Lord Alan turned his eyes toward me with a start. "Oh, Lady Elianna...isn't reading anymore."

Indeed. I lost my concentration after being consumed with thought.

As I contemplated, I eyed the two pale men and then turned my attention to Lord Glen.

"A riddle for you. What do a greedy nobleman and an elderly man with outdated and detrimental opinions have in common?" I asked.

Lord Glen stuttered, "I-I don't know, what?"

"Both long for something fleeting."

He slumped in disappointment, bracing his hands on the table in front of him. His eyes fell to the ground and his body trembled.

Lord Alexei, accustomed to such exchanges, merely sighed and interjected, "If this is a guest from the Miseral Dukedom, then they must be close to the queen as well. I do believe the prince also plans to meet with her, yes?"

"I do," said His Highness. "Last time, I went straight home after the ceremony. If she's related to the former general, then that means she's connected to the archduke's family as well. Glen, there's no running from this one."

"You can't be serious," Lord Glen growled, tears in his eyes. "This is precisely why I planned to privately reject their proposal before things could come to a head. But you're the one who suddenly insisted we return straight back to Sauslind before I could make preparations to nip this in the bud. It wouldn't kill you to feel guilty for your own actions, would it?"

He must have been referring to the Hunting Festival incident. Back then, the prince had left the country to attend a ceremony held in one of our allied countries, the Miseral Dukedom. I was partially responsible for his haste to return home.

Prince Christopher shrugged, his hands never stopping as he sorted through documents. "Not too long ago, Countess Eisenach was lamenting to my mother about all of your trysts. You reap what you sow. Just give up."

After His Highness said that, Lord Alexei and Lord Alan expressed their sympathies. "In anticipation of the prince's wedding, more and more people are tying the knot all across the country. It's perfect

timing.”

“So this is where fooling around indiscriminately leads one. I will keep that in mind for future reference.”

Lord Glen’s voice turned somber. “Friendship is one of the founding pillars of youth. Do you guys even know the meaning of the word?”

His Highness smiled. “I’m too busy.”

Lord Alexei narrowed his glacial eyes. “If ‘friendship’ entails you seeking assistance in sorting through documents, I will readily lend my wisdom to the cause.”

“I’ll do whatever, as long as it’s interesting,” Lord Alan added, strumming his instrument.

I actually felt a little sorry for Lord Glen, who was now left feeling even more dejected than before. Perhaps my femininity was the reason I found myself unable to grasp the intricacies of camaraderie between men.

Before I could add my own opinion, Lord Alexei cut me off. “All joking aside, the timing of all of this does strike me as a bit too convenient. Alan, how is the investigation proceeding?”

Lord Alan hummed, his demeanor still relaxed. Then his eyes turned toward me, as if he’d suddenly remembered something. “Oh, Lady Elianna, isn’t it about time?”

As if on cue, the chamberlain announced that some people had come to visit me. It seemed Lord Alan was right; I was out of time.

I announced my departure and stood to leave, prompting Prince Christopher to pause and turn his worried gaze to me. “Eli, is there anything bothering you?”

“Pardon?” I stared back at him blankly.

His Highness started to say something, hesitated, and then ultimately played it off. “No, never mind. You have your sworn duties. I can’t intervene any longer. As long as there’s nothing bothering you, it’s fine.”

I tilted my head at him, but there was no time to waste. After a curtsy, I slipped out through the door.

The prince had asked if I was “bothered” by anything. It was true that lately I found myself beset by a problem I’d been unprepared to deal with. My feet felt heavy as I trudged toward the source of my apprehension.

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A court lady came to fetch me and then guided me to the inner palace. I swallowed a tiny breath as I stepped inside the adjoining room we always passed through each time we did this.

A group of people were waiting to accost me, eyes gleaming like

predators that had found their next meal. They held their most proficient weapons in their hands, waiting for the signal that it was okay to move in.

Meanwhile, I would be forced to face them alone. I was at an overwhelming disadvantage. As the Bibliophile Princess, I had to do this. Where there is a will, there is a way, as they say.

I had no idea how the court lady who had retrieved me earlier perceived our tense standoff, but she was as curt as ever when she said, "You may begin."

The palace maids and royal merchants gleefully charged toward me. The only weapon I ever had was my books, but even they had been taken from me. I was truly powerless.

"Lady Elianna! I have a precious yellow pearl taken from a Palmyran Nemu snail. It would offset your skin tone beautifully."

"I have also prepared some brand new designs myself. I even sought input from one of your favorite sketch artists from the far east. What do you think?"

"Have a look at my textiles. I have dyed fabrics from the Tor Region and newly developed ones made with more advanced materials. If you use these for your dress, you're certain to look even more captivating than you already do, my lady!"

I knew a bit about the textiles from the Tor Region. They had tailored a new lightweight fabric that made dresses more breathable in the summer months. Some were even considering using those materials to craft curtains as well.

...Were they trying to stoke my reputation as a ghost even further? Lightweight fabric would only make me look more transparent and spectral.

Contrary to my suspicions, the people surrounding me continued to thrust colorful words, fabrics, designs, and adornments my way. It was a proverbial ocean wave crashing over me. My eyes were soon spinning.

One after the other, maids approached with gorgeous dresses for me to inspect. I was flustered from the very beginning, having this forced upon me. When I looked up and saw my reflection in the mirror and realized just how out of place I looked, I felt utterly ashamed of myself. My current challenge was to pick one dress among those presented, as well as some adornments to go along with them. This was all for the purpose of narrowing down my list of candidates for who would be appointed to the important post of supplying me when I became crown princess. To be frank, this was not something I was well-equipped to handle.

There was no lady to run the Bernstein household anymore. When it came to fashion, I'd had no woman to use as a reference since I was

a child. This might sound like a flimsy excuse as well, but by nature, the Bernsteins weren't concerned with dressing to impress.

Fathers were completely useless when it came to a lady's clothing and wedding attire. My aunt was the one responsible for orchestrating everything related to my societal debut.

I had used a fair measure of caution in selecting my apparel up until this point, conscious of my position as the crown prince's betrothed. Imperfect as my attempts might have been, I was proud of the four years I had spent cultivating an eye for fashion befitting my stature. Those who knew me well—such as house maids, my aunt, and my cousins—gave me advice and played a huge part in my growth.

Now, however, things were a bit different. I was far removed from all of them and left to face my circumstances on my own, and that bitter reminder caused my entire body to tense up. Being unproficient didn't give me the right to waive my responsibilities, I knew. I was the one who decided I wanted to stay with His Highness.

With renewed determination, I pointed at one of the dresses. "This dress from the Mers company has a plunging neckline. I don't think it would suit me. Similarly, the sketches show fresh flowers being used in the design, but they seem to be based on the Yule flower from the far eastern country of Norn. According to Gaelga mythology, Yule represents the goddess's beloved maidens, a symbol for purity. However, it has a strong scent, and it would be impossible to remove its pollen from the dress, making it an inappropriate choice for social gatherings."

After a moment of contemplation, I proposed, "It would take quite a bit of effort, but... According to the theologian Porta Tugga's thesis entitled *False Image of the Gods*, while the goddess safeguards pure maidens, she also adores florid palettes and designs. Thus, by lowering this collar further, you could add a panel under it with decorative lace using a Yule flower motif. I imagine the resulting contrast of maturity and the symbolism of innocence would appeal to younger women. Though, it would require some careful consideration to ensure it isn't sold too widely. Also, for that design you mentioned, embroidery of the flower rather than actual flowers could make it popular with young ladies making their societal debuts."

For a moment, the crowd's demanding onslaught seemed to ease. However, just as quickly, their eyes turned feverish as they scrambled for my attention, burying me in a mountain of adornments.

"Lady Elianna, please, I would like your feedback on my design as well—"

"Good grief, the Nash company just received her input yesterday. Have some restraint."

"What are you talking about? The Sinus company keeps asking

her about the origins of certain jewels every single time. Are you sure you aren't merely failing to win Lady Elianna's favor?"

"What did you just say?!" The two proceeded to bark at each other viciously.

Meanwhile, one of the palace maids cheerfully chirped, "Lady Elianna, I really do think this milky white dress with its soft tones would suit you perfectly. It would complement your hair and eye color."

"What a bizarre thing to say. Then the dress would be the same color as her hair. Personally, I think this dark-as-midnight shade of navy blue complements you better. It will amplify the air of mystery you already exude."

"Nonsense. If mystery is the only appeal you give her, she'll be just another story in *One Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*. If they come out with yet another sequel entitled *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Inner Palace*, what will we do then, hm?!"

"Oh, please. There's already conjecture about seven *new* mysteries in the royal archives, so it's a bit late for that. Besides, if you ask my opinion, I think this pink dress suits you far better. It brings out your girlish side."

"Pink is a graduation color. Lady Elianna is becoming crown princess. A softer palette would suit her more."

"I disagree," another voice chimed in, triggering bickering among the maids as they drowned me in a sea of dresses.

There were some rude remarks thrown in there that were difficult to ignore, but there was also a chance that one among them might be serving me soon. Part of my assignment was to remember their names, faces, and temperaments. Though I understood that, I was unaccustomed to having objects thrust at me one after the other. I wasn't one to give up easily, but after all this, I was almost ready to raise my flag in surrender.

As I swam out of the sea of dresses in hopes of taking a breath after nearly drowning in them, an authoritative voice suddenly rang out, stilling the commotion.

"Elianna. Have you still not selected your outfit?" Her tone was curt and dignified, washing over us. Immediately, everyone in the room tensed. At her appearance from the adjoining room, all of the other people present simultaneously froze in place and straightened their postures before bowing. I was no exception, even as I looked utterly disheveled with all manner of fabrics and dresses draped over me.

Standing before us was the most noble woman in our kingdom—Prince Christopher's mother, Queen Henrietta. Absolutely everyone paid her respect.

Her gaze flitted across the room, passing over me with my head bowed. She let out a quiet sigh behind the safety of her open folding fan. “I realize this is a daily occurrence, but it is still unacceptable. Elianna, your duties as crown princess don’t include giving merchants beneficial advice to earn their favor. Nor does it include heeding the whims of maids. Do you understand your position?”

“...Yes.” Plagued with a sense of shame and embarrassment, I kept my head low.

Queen Henrietta breathed a small sigh before immediately doling out instructions. “I want that bright golden dress with the low neckline. For the jewelry, hm... Using the same shade of pearl would be too uninspiring. Do any of you have a fresh and original silverwork design?”

At Her Majesty’s prompting, the jewelers quickly crowded around her. The chaos from a few moments ago was nowhere to be seen; everyone was suddenly very orderly. They all knew their place and kept needless chatter to a minimum. It was a night-and-day difference to how they had interacted with me.

I let out an imperceptible sigh, wondering if I would ever be like her. Unease and anxiety gripped me, and I found myself exhaling another shaky breath. I was glad at least the queen’s entourage wasn’t present today.

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I was forced to parade around in three different outfits until we settled on the very first one—the golden yellow dress with its early-spring tones, a modest yet elegant silverpiece adornment, and a hairpiece with a floral design. That alone was enough to leave me feeling a bit drained. Nonetheless, it was better this time than it had been before.

Normally, the queen’s entourage of married noblewomen would begin inserting all of their opinions and it would take twice or thrice the time to simply select an outfit. Not to mention how many dozens of times they made me swap between outfits for them. I understood they were all fussing over me because I no longer had a mother of my own. Still, I sometimes found myself feeling more like a dress up doll than a person. Perhaps that was too rude of me...

The merchant companies paid their respects politely before leaving, but as cleanup in the wake of their departure commenced, I secretly wandered over to one of the maids to deliver my gratitude. “Sarah, thank you for your help with the Milulu clam business the other day. Could you convey my gratitude to the other members of your household as well?”

The maid had a calm and quiet demeanor and was most likely

being conscious of her surroundings as she softly replied, “It was really nothing, Lady Elianna. The village in the Azul Region may get more lively now thanks to you. They should really be the ones extending gratitude.”

“Pardon?” I tilted my head at her.

Sarah’s smile only grew, but before our conversation could carry on, a terse voice cut in. “Elianna.”

I snapped to attention, and Sarah gave a bow, as was expected for a maid serving in the inner palace, and took her leave.

Once the room had cleared out, only the queen, her lady-in-waiting, and a number of her senior maids remained. A table sat between the two of us. Across from me, the queen gracefully slid her fan closed. I straightened my posture.

She was forty-three years old. Her slim frame seemed to belie the unyielding and commanding aura she exuded, which always pressured those in her presence to naturally straighten themselves. There was a grace about her; even her fingers looked elegant as they manipulated the folding fan in her hands. She had glossy auburn hair and eyes of the same shade—eyes that always seemed to regard me critically.

“Elianna, I realize we have this talk each and every time, but you are the future crown princess of the Sauslind Kingdom. Eventually, you will bear the weight of my crown and the responsibilities that come with it. If you continue to allow Chris to protect you while you immerse yourself in books, you’ll eventually find yourself in trouble when a situation arises where you must be self-reliant.”

She absolutely had a point. So I solemnly replied, “Yes, you are right.”

Every time the queen entertained special guests from abroad, either at meetings or events, I accompanied her as the prince’s betrothed. We had spent a lot of time together as a result. Queen Henrietta was tough on people. The general consensus was that she couldn’t stand anyone who couldn’t think on their own two feet. However, it seemed to me that she had even higher standards for herself.

No matter how tense or grave the situation, she maintained her dignity and composure. I couldn’t even count how many times I found myself admiring her. So when she exhaled in exasperation at me, I couldn’t help feeling utterly pathetic.

“The reason we had etiquette training for noble ladies in the spring was to select some among them to serve you in the future. As always, my son tried to drive you away from us, and everything took a ridiculous turn from there. He needs to work on that faint-heartedness of his, admittedly, but more pressing is his troublesome overprotectiveness.” Her rebuke spilled over to Prince Christopher as

well.

I wasn't sure to the extent of which the queen was privy to the details of our engagement agreement, but I was fully aware by now that the prince had limited my presence in high society as much as he could. Since the day our wedding date was selected, I had been spending more time outfitting myself and participating in high society than I had reading books. This was especially true now that the year was ending and a new one was set to begin, with the Holy Night's Banquet fast approaching. My capabilities were a reflection on the prince and his reputation.

Equipped with a completely different thought process and frame of mind than I'd possessed the year before, I asked the queen to elaborate on what she meant by the prince's protection of me.

Her Majesty's eyes narrowed into slits as she snapped her fan closed again after opening it just moments prior. "Up until this point, you've been exempt from receiving any substantial princess training. This was, of course, largely due to your capabilities and accomplishments, which silenced any potential protest. That said, now that your official wedding date has been selected, you cannot continue to depend on the prince's kindness. You will be part of the royal family, so you must learn to read between the lines. You need to equip yourself with the skills required to contend with seasoned vultures in the government and outside of it. In that regard, you are socially far behind your peers. You realize this, I assume?" There was a gravity in her words, as if she was questioning my resolve.

I kept a tight grip on my emotions and nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Her brows drew slightly. "Elianna," she murmured my name, sounding as if I had offended her somehow.

I swallowed hard, worried I'd made some kind of mistake in my response.

Queen Henrietta's eyes narrowed as she watched me. "We spoke of this not long ago. What is it you should call me when it's just the two of us?"

"Huh...?" I grew flustered. Those words sounded more like something I would expect to hear from His Highness, granted the atmosphere here was the complete opposite. The prince was always sweet with me, while his mother was harsh.

Queen Henrietta's words implied she was giving me permission to be more relaxed and familiar around her, but just a moment ago she had also told me I needed to read between the lines. I wasn't sure if I was safe to take this at face value or if she was testing me. My mind spun in circles.

Regardless, what really had my heart hammering in my chest was

thinking of how long it had been since I'd used the word she wanted to hear. It was precious and nostalgic. The mere thought of it evoked a sense of warmth that I couldn't get anywhere else, blanketing around me. Even if her words belied a different meaning, I couldn't help the surge of emotion I felt.

My eyes automatically shifted to the floor, my cheeks warming. I clutched nervously at my knees—something I knew wasn't very ladylike. Then I spoke the word, voice infused with joy and longing, "...Mother."

Instantly, I heard an ominous crack. When I lifted my head in surprise, I noticed the queen's eyes were wide. Her lips were trembling, pulled taut over her teeth as if she were about to bare them at me. I recoiled in surprise. That sinister sound had been her folding fan, which she gripped tightly in her hand. I'd seen her make this same face just days before. That was how I knew I had flubbed things. My face grew pale.

Before I could offer my apologies, the queen's lady-in-waiting stepped up behind her and whispered in her ear, "Your Majesty, your expression..."

Queen Henrietta returned to her senses and smoothed her features, clearing her throat before she snapped her fan open again. Its frame was a bit warped now. "Elianna, I told you this before, but there's no need for you to feel embarrassed about calling me 'mother.' You make it sound as if I'm forcing you to use the word."

"Yes... I am sorry." I had absolutely no earthly clue what I was being scolded for, but I withered under her gaze and apologized anyway.

The other day as she was teaching me the ways of the royal family, as she always did, she had suddenly said to me, "When spring comes, you will be my daughter-in-law. So please, call me 'mother.'" I was genuinely happy to comply, but perhaps it was too presumptuous of me given that she was a queen.

Her Majesty cleared her throat again. The air around her seemed to shift as she breathed another sigh into the shadow of her fan. "At any rate, there is something very important I wish to speak to you about today."

"Very well."

This conversation she wanted to have was likely the cause for her usual entourage's absence. I straightened my posture.

"There is a guest from the Miseral Dukedom presently staying with the Eisenach family," she began. "I am sure you're already well aware of my connection to the Dukedom."

"...Yes."

Queen Henrietta was a noble of Sauslind, but her own mother—

Prince Christopher's grandmother—was originally a princess from the Dukedom. She later married into a Sauslind duke's family, and their union resulted in the birth of Queen Henrietta. Thus, when she later married His Majesty, both countries joined together to celebrate. This resulted in an even stronger bond between our nations. That was also the reason for Prince Christopher attending that ceremony not long ago. This was common knowledge though, not just among the nobles but most of the citizens as well.

Still, I got the impression that the queen was hinting at more. There was something that immediately came to mind. Prince Christopher had told me once before that Queen Henrietta wasn't good at dealing with diplomatic matters. However, Her Majesty struck me as impenetrable, someone who didn't show any such weakness. To me, it didn't seem as if she were unskilled with diplomacy so much as she was drawing a line. As long as she wasn't proactive, she didn't risk getting too close to her blood relations in the Miseral Dukedom. The queen understood her position and was acting cautiously so as not to become overly familiar with any one nation.

Her Majesty nodded quietly, eyes hooded and heavy. "It's about time I talked to you about this properly. Since we have a guest from the Dukedom, it's the perfect occasion. Elianna, do you remember the Ashen Nightmare from fifteen years ago?"

My heart hammered in my chest. For a second, I forgot to breathe.

The Ashen Nightmare was the name of a deadly disease that had begun spreading in the northeast fifteen years ago. It was highly contagious, its origins unknown. Even now we had yet to find an effective treatment for it. It was characterized by the ashen-colored flecks that appeared on the skin of those who contracted it, giving it the popular name Ashen Nightmare.

This plague had spread its hold over Sauslind for a period, claiming even Queen Henrietta among its victims. It stole my mother's life and ran rampant across the kingdom for three years, resulting in an explosive number of casualties. It was only with the changing of the seasons during the final year that it relinquished its hold. Although a whole decade had passed since then, those of a certain age could still vividly remember the nightmare it had been.

It was during the second year of its reign of chaos that Queen Henrietta contracted the disease. She was twenty-nine at the time. Prince Christopher was a mere seven-year-old boy. Her Majesty was sent away from the capital to ensure the plague couldn't spread to those in the palace. She spent a prolonged period fighting the illness at a quiet place in the countryside, or so I'd heard. There wasn't a trace of the sickness left within her now that she had conquered it. Left unmentioned, most people would forget she'd ever had it.

Queen Henrietta spoke matter-of-factly, her voice devoid of all emotion. “After I came down with the disease, the nobles’ demands only grew stronger. It had taken some time for me to conceive Chris after we wed, so there were many around us with strong opinions on what course of action should be taken.”

My body stiffened. This was all common knowledge among the nobles of Sauslind. When I first became engaged to the prince, one of the ladies-in-waiting kindly filled me in. Said lady-in-waiting was the one currently standing behind Queen Henrietta right now. Her name was Agnes, and she was the queen’s confidante.

She was the one who had informed me of the present issue with the royal family. Namely, that there was only one direct descendent of the crown at present: Prince Christopher. Normally, when a king ascended the throne, his younger brother would relinquish any claim he had in order to avoid an unnecessary power struggle, thereby losing his royal title. However, Prince Theodore still maintained his status.

When I first became engaged to Prince Christopher, the palace had been split into three warring factions: one that supported Prince Theodore, one that supported Prince Christopher, and one that maintained neutrality. However, Prince Theodore had no desire to be king, and he had abstained from marrying a lady from any noble family, instead choosing to remain single. Thus, the faction supporting him had no ground on which to stand and collapsed.

This was just my own conjecture, but I suspected that Prince Theodore was conscious of the situation and that was why he elected to act as curator to the royal archive, rendering himself as politically impotent as possible. Part of that, of course, was because he loved books, but I wasn’t convinced that was all. He was a brilliant young man who never displayed any skill of note and refused to engage himself to a house with any measure of power. Bluntly put, one might even say it was as though he were neglecting his duties as a prince. I surmised that, on the contrary, he was merely doing so to avoid any conflict about the line of succession.

Back then, Prince Christopher had been just a boy at the tender age of seven. Prince Theodore, in contrast, had just become an adult man, still fresh in his youth. It wouldn’t have been strange for those backing Prince Christopher to come up with some kind of scheme to obtain more heirs so they could maintain the influence necessary to oppose Prince Theodore. Given the position that Queen Henrietta was in at the time, I found myself gulping as the realization hit me.

“...You mean they wanted a harem?”

Her Majesty was only ever blessed with one child. Before she could even hope for another, she’d fallen ill. Those around them

probably realized there was no hope that she could produce a second heir.

Behind her folding fan, Queen Henrietta narrowed her eyes and quietly nodded.

“But,” I found myself blurting out before I could think to stop myself, “you had the backing of the Miseral Dukedom—” The moment the words left my mouth, I realized my folly.

Queen Henrietta eyed me with the same frigid expression she wore during diplomatic meetings. When she spoke, she confirmed exactly what I suspected. “At the time, although the dukedom was nothing more than a tiny country, it was still the biggest maritime nation, with a capable archduke revered as the Sea King. He couldn’t ignore the opportunity to sink his teeth into Sauslind when the chance presented itself. In fact, they offered their own princess up readily, claiming it was in exchange for me failing in my duties as queen.”

“They couldn’t possibly,” I murmured, stunned. Her Majesty had been on the brink of death with the plague, and they had sunk the knife in deeper. A sharp pang ran through my chest.

The queen watched me quietly. Her voice was hushed as she asked, “Do you think them cruel? Insensitive in their treatment of me while I was battling for my life? But you should know, that is the fate of any woman who marries into the royal family.”

She snapped her fan shut. Her eyes regarded me as sharply as ever, as if she were silently staring right through me. “What’s important isn’t your lack of social finesse. It’s your lack of resolve when it comes to marrying into the royal family. What happened to me wasn’t mere happenstance or ill fortune. Someday, you may be faced with the very same issue.”

I swallowed hard, my body tensing.

Those auburn eyes of hers fixed on me. “Are you truly prepared to stand beside the crown prince of this country?”

Her quiet words punctured my heart like little daggers. Undulating waves of anxiety seemed to surge up around me, swallowing me whole.

Chapter 2: Budding Seed

One corner of the greenhouse was bright with gorgeous colors and an equally brilliant atmosphere. It was early afternoon. Two days had passed since my conversation with Queen Henrietta.

It was a sunny day, and although it remained chilly outside, there was a relaxing warmth in the air that enveloped the greenhouse and made it cozy. Music softly trickled between the sound of women's lighthearted conversation. The blooming foreign flowers and the pristine white snow piled up outside made for a vivid contrast. This sight and the accompanying music bespoke the splendor and art of Sauslind.

The greenhouse was the pride of Sauslind, acting as an entertainment venue for foreign guests. There were several tables inside, but the one most lively with conversation was the one occupied by the prince and myself. A girl was seated across from us, her cheerfulness infectious enough to liven up the whole area around her.

"...And so, Lord Glen was the one who destroyed the snow bunny," she said. "A shame after Prince Christopher painstakingly made it for Lady Mireille."

The girl currently speaking was the very guest from the Miseral Dukedom that Lord Glen and the others had mentioned days before. Her name was Sharon Godwin. She had a young, adorable face, rich crimson red hair, and verdant green eyes that shone with delight. When she smiled, there were noticeable dimples in her cheeks.

However, the person who truly drew everyone's attention was not Lady Sharon or even the handsome prince of Sauslind; it was the female knight from the Miseral Dukedom that stood watch nearby. Her appearance was breathtaking, and her shape was elegant. She kept her defenses mounted without disrupting the mood of those around her, and when she met someone's gaze, she offered them a graceful smile. She had forest green eyes and jet black hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. Left free, it would have descended well past her shoulders. Her body was slender but toned, appearing agile and yet soft enough to remain feminine. She even captivated other women with her looks.

Although they numbered few, there were female knights in Sauslind as well, but most of them weren't accomplished enough to

hold a position as a noble's bodyguard. For that reason, this foreign beauty was rather rare. That fueled people's curiosity.

Whether he was aware of the real center of attention or not, Prince Christopher kept his smile on Lady Sharon as he responded, "That happened back when I was five or six years old. Lady Ramond was about the same age. The only ones who saw that and might remember are the maids from the time or the chamberlain."

"Oh? I heard it directly from Lady Mireille. She remembers her time with you so fondly that she still talks about it even now."

I felt a prickle in my chest. The person Lady Sharon spoke so innocently of was the Miseral Dukedom's pride and joy, their "Pearl Princess." She was the archduke's famous daughter, both gorgeous and intelligent. She no longer possessed her royal status, though, since she married into one of the dukedom's noble families. She was close in age to Prince Christopher, Lord Glen, and Lord Alexei, so the four of them had spent a lot of time together as children.

Of course, it only made sense, really. Sure, the two of us did have our own fateful meeting when we were younger, but even before our brief encounter, Prince Christopher had already cultivated a close relationship with someone else. Of course he did. It was natural.

Lady Sharon and Princess Mireille—now called Lady Ramond after her marriage—had grown up together almost like sisters. It was clear from the way Lady Sharon spoke about Lady Ramond that she idolized her.

Suddenly, Lady Sharon's adorable features darkened, turning pensive. "I wish Lady Mireille could have been invited to the Holy Night's Banquet too, but...she's still in mourning."

The prince's smile vanished. He turned somber and nodded. "My deep condolences to her for her loss. To have lost her husband after being married not even two years is truly a tragedy. As her relative, however distant, and the citizen of a country allied with the Dukedom, she has my sympathy." He lowered his blue eyes in silent requiem.

Lady Sharon tried to sound more mature than her years as she said, "There's no need for you to do that, Your Highness. If you would give some of your attention to her, I am sure Lady Mireille would liven right back up again."

I'd heard word of what they were referring to; Lady Ramond had recently lost her husband and was now widowed.

As if in prayer, Lady Sharon clapped her hands together, her earnest eyes directed up at His Highness. "Prince Christopher, I realize it's ill manners to make this request of you, but I beg of you. As her childhood friend, won't you console Lady Mireille in her grief? If you would write her a letter or send her a memento from your childhood

together, I am sure it would ease her heart.” Her pleading eyes turned next to me. “Lady Elianna, she’s aching from the loss of her husband. Please be understanding.”

I blinked back at her. What she was basically saying was she wanted His Highness to comfort another woman—a newly widowed one who had previously been childhood friends with the prince—and didn’t want me to raise a fuss over it. Assuming I understood her right.

Before I could open my mouth to say anything, the prince cut me off with a smile. “Lady Sharon, it’s true the two of us were childhood friends, and she does have my sympathies, but I cannot offer her anything more than Sauslind’s condolences for her loss. Anything more than that and I might cause suffering to a woman drowning in the memories of her lost husband. I’m sure you don’t wish for her reputation to be tarnished either, do you?”

Lady Sharon recoiled. “But,” she tried to protest.

Prince Christopher’s voice remained gentle. He was trying to speak as kindly to her as possible. “You really do idolize her. I can tell how much you want to comfort her in her time of need. Glen is truly blessed to have found such a promising partner like you with such a kind heart.” He smiled once he finished speaking.

The little girl’s cheeks heated up.

The two married noblewomen who had watched the exchange now grinned approvingly over at the prince. “You couldn’t be more right,” Countess Eisenach agreed. “It is an unmistakable godsend for an adorable girl like this to be marrying into our family. Everyone is so jealous. They swear our house must be under the divine protection of the marriage goddess,” she said, chortling. She had a gentle manner and graceful air about her, but she was also very steadfast in her opinions. Even seated in front of the prince, she didn’t falter. Her demeanor was exactly what you might expect from the woman who was married to the general of the imperial guard.

The prince cackled as well and then aimed a meaningful smile her way. “Countess Eisenach, you’re a troublemaker as well. Is that how you stirred up my mother? With talk about the joys of having a daughter and such?”

“Oh goodness,” she exclaimed, amusement twinkling in her eyes. “Forgive me for saying this, Your Highness, but I doubt a gentleman like you would understand. A daughter is a blessing from the heavens. They’re like a single blooming flower amidst a squalid household full of men. Men are crass and crude, from their voices to their attitudes. They ramble all that nonsense about ‘male honor’ and status, but then embarrass themselves with their hangovers, acting like the fresh garbage they really are... Oh dear, forgive the tangent. At any rate, daughters are like an adorable light that outshines such scum. They

are so sweet. I can hardly handle it when one says, 'Mother, I have a favor I'd like to ask.' Ahh, it just makes my heart...oh... I can't even...!" The countess flailed around in her chair, prompting me to draw back. Beside her, Lady Sharon seemed similarly put off. The other noblewoman next to Lady Sharon shared the sentiment.

Unfazed, Prince Christopher merely snickered at her. "Is that the way you enthused about a daughter's charms to my mother? I think Eli's appeal already speaks for itself without you vouching for her. I would prefer if she didn't participate in all your gushing." He offered her a casual smile, but it also sounded like he was chiding her. "Please don't give my mother any strange ideas."

I stared back at him, unsure if I should blush or tilt my head in confusion. When I spoke with Queen Henrietta, I did so with the understanding that she was a member of the royal family. I didn't engage her in heartwarming chatter as a daughter-in-law might with her mother-in-law.

When His Highness noticed my gaze, he turned to me and offered a warm smile. There was emotion in his eyes that he showed no one else, and that naturally made my cheeks heat up.

"Oh, goodness me." Countess Eisenach grinned as she glanced between us, having recovered from her previous fit, and snapped her fan open. "You two certainly are intimate with one another. It's almost like the legends, the Hero King and his most beloved maiden, Princess Ceysheila."

"Countess Eisenach, please refrain from such comparisons even in jest. As I recall, though women certainly do enjoy that story as a tale of true love, it's also a tragedy. I have absolutely no intention of handing Elianna over to anyone or anything, be it an illness or the god of death himself."

"Your Highness..." His words left me flustered. My face flushed.

He took my hand and smiled over at me, as if gauging my reaction.

I felt even more embarrassed now, and as my gaze swam, I noticed Lady Sharon's quiet, appraising eyes staring over. She quickly resumed her usual expression, a charming smile back on her lips. "The two of you really are close. It's almost like the *Yule Lovers* tale."

"*Yule Lovers*?" I canted my head.

She seemed surprised at that. "Oh. I heard you love books so much that I just assumed you had heard of it. It's a very popular romance story in my country."

"Oh..." My eyebrows sank together. At tea parties, the ladies often talked about love stories and romantic poetry. I perused the ones my aunt and cousins recommended in order to keep up to date, but I certainly wasn't interested enough to indulge in keeping up with

foreign trends in the genre. “Well, what kind of tale is it?”

Before she could open her mouth to enlighten me, I felt a strong squeeze on my hand. “It’s a tale about a prince and the maiden of flowers who is beloved by the goddess,” Prince Christopher explained. “It’s not very well known in Sauslind, but if they make it into a play, why don’t we go watch it together?”

“Um...”

“I’ll bring you a Yule bouquet when I invite you.”

“Y-Your Highness, um...” I felt a bit awkward. He certainly was acting differently today than he usually did.

He’d been open about our relationship since the day our official wedding date was set, but he’d still maintained a certain level of modesty. At least until today. His advances felt more persistent, which gave me the impression that something was off. I wanted to inquire, but the sound of Countess Eisenach’s laughter cut me short.

“You two sure are flaunting your relationship,” she said.

His Highness gave no indication he minded. “I can’t help myself, she’s my beloved fiancée.”

My cheeks burned. There was nothing I could say.

A chamberlain ambled over and whispered something into the prince’s ear. His Highness gave a composed nod before flashing us with a brilliant, heart-stopping smile. “My apologies. It was pleasant chatting with you lovely ladies, but duty calls, I’m afraid. As much as it pains me to say this, I’ll have to excuse myself here. Please do forgive me.”

Countess Eisenach spoke up on behalf of all of us. “Why, not at all. We should be the ones thanking you for taking time out of your busy schedule and joining us, Prince Christopher.”

He smiled back at her. When he lifted himself from his chair, he turned to me, knelt, and lifted my hand toward him. I returned his gaze only to find a slightly ponderous look in those blue eyes.

“...I’ll see you again later, Eli.” He kissed the tips of my fingers, grinned softly at me, and took off. Everyone’s eyes lingered on his back as he slipped out of the greenhouse.

After that, we all engaged in idle chatter together, and the rest of our tea party proceeded smoothly.

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Everything seemed to be going well after that, at least until the evening party the very next day.

The Holy Night’s Banquet was just a week away. Once it ended, all of the offices in the palace went on break until after the new year. Many nobles had returned to their territories after the Hunting Festival, putting high society events in the capital on hold for the time

being. For that reason, many diplomats, ambassadors, and others who held official positions in the capital gathered at these evening parties to indulge themselves.

The queen was hosting tonight's party in her royal villa, detached from the main palace. It was almost like a Holy Night's Eve festival, attended by women and men of all ages—a full cast of gorgeous faces basking in the atmosphere.

Yesterday, the prince told me he would “see me again later,” but he was so busy with his administrative work and I was so preoccupied by my own official duties that we seemed to always miss each other, never quite finding the time to spend together. In fact, he didn't make it in time to escort me for this evening party, and since His Majesty was similarly engaged, both Queen Henrietta and I entered the venue alone. She graciously allowed me to stay next to her as the guest of honor, though.

I greeted those who came to pay their respects, engaging them in conversation even as I wore an uncomfortable smile on my face. When a pair of women approached us, I felt a sudden surge of apprehension.

“A most lovely evening, Queen Henrietta, Lady Elianna.”

Queen Henrietta had her fan closed on her lap. Her fingertips quietly tapped against it. I had realized, in the four years I'd spent with her, that this was her way of signaling to me to be cautious around these people.

Normally, I agreed with her assessment about the need for discretion, but today I found myself tilting my head quizzically for a very different reason.

“Good evening, Viscountess Dauner. I see your daughter is with you as well. Good evening, Lady Matilda.” Queen Henrietta handled them with her normal composure. The former was a plump woman in her mid-forties, while the latter was nearly her exact opposite, slender and in her early twenties.

Following the queen's polite reception, I tried to bow my head in a formal, ladylike greeting, but the viscountess cut me off with a peal of laughter. “Your Majesty, I tailored this dress I'm wearing using my daughter's own design. She's also designed another, which she's wearing right now. I had no idea she had such a hidden talent. When spring comes, I am sure the dress she's designed will be a hit. What do you think? Might I ask for your honest assessment?” Her voice boomed so loudly it drew the attention of those around us. Lady Matilda proudly puffed out her chest alongside her mother.

I blinked furiously, staring at their attire. The older woman was in a lustrous purple dress decorated lavishly with lace and jewels. It hugged her body, trying to compliment the graceful curves of a woman's figure, yet it looked as if it might tear at the seams at any

moment. It had a bold neckline with an eye-catching lace panel set beneath it, but...regrettably, the lace stood out for all the wrong reasons. It looked tacky and poorly crafted. Plus, the skin it revealed was...well, forgive me for saying, but not very classy.

Unfortunately, Lady Matilda's outfit didn't fare much better. The pink dress she had wrapped around her lithe body didn't match her rectangular-shaped face very well. Worse still, the flower embroidery she'd used to highlight her dress looked garish, almost like a beautiful flower being strangled by a venomous snake. That only drew my interest more, and as I squinted and studied the flowers, I realized she seemed to be using the Yule flower as her motif. There were five petals with jagged edges that bent back and a long, curled pistil in the center. It was considered a difficult flower to use as a motif, and given Matilda's crude rendition of it, you could clearly tell it was rushed work.

While I struggled to decide how best to respond to their request for feedback, Queen Henrietta gave a slow nod. "A bit eccentric, I must say, but the idea may have some promise."

Everyone around us had their brows drawn together, and when they heard the queen say that, surprise flashed on their faces. While they stared at their monarch, Viscountess Dauner's lips peeled back in a triumphant smirk. She stuck her nose up in the air proudly as she said, "Matilda knows a great deal about the history of the Norn nation to our east. That's how she got the idea of using the Yule flower in her design. Even I was shocked by just how extensive her knowledge is. She told me about the origins of the flower, how it's beloved by the goddess, and how she used that theme as a basis in her design. My house has already started negotiations with major companies in order to procure these flowers. I have no doubt these designs will help us foster good relations with Norn as well."

That was enough to draw the attention of politically shrewd ambassadors and noblemen, creating a stir as people exchanged looks among themselves. Viscountess Dauner's face gleamed even brighter, as if she felt empowered by their attention. My inner confusion crumbled as panic seeped in to take its place, though I was careful not to let it show on my face.

The queen's voice remained as steady and dependable as ever. "Oh, is Lady Matilda interested in diplomacy, then? Or is the reason she still remains single at her age because she has been hoping to strike it big as a designer?"

"Your Majesty, if you might allow me to speak," Lady Matilda started in a squeaky voice. Her words were humble and modest, but her eyes and voice displayed clear confidence. "Though I may be inadequate, being a woman, I pray to always serve the greater good

for my country. The only way for me to do so, frankly, is to marry, so that I may be faithful and devoted to my husband and carry on his family's lineage. A woman's greatest honor is fulfilling the duty she was born to carry out."

Those words, spoken with such egotism, were like a jab to the heart after the conversation I shared with the queen about her illness and the possibility of a harem.

Viscountess Dauner's sonorous laughter seemed to echo her daughter's sentiments. "My daughter has the proper mindset for a lady. She wouldn't embarrass me no matter what noble house I might send her to. I am proud of her. It seems a mother's guidance, or lack thereof, has an enormous impact on a lady's character. If a lady is *too* intelligent, while that might garner interest at first for being rare, she will only cause grief to the man she marries, thereby earning his resentment. As I'm sure you must know, a lady must not be too assertive; she exists to complement her husband." Her words sounded like the hollow echo of what the supposed "ideal virtuous noblewoman" should be, and it prompted a number of the more conservative nobles to nod in agreement.

Since the queen remained magnanimous in her willingness to let the viscountess speak her mind, the woman went on. "My queen, I realize I am being presumptuous, but if it would please you, we would happily present you a dress designed by my daughter. You can see her talent already yourself. I am confident we could prepare something that would live up to your expectations, Your Majesty."

Something about her bold tone of voice struck me—it was radiant, dazzling. Leaving her calculations and motivations aside, I could feel the pride she had for her daughter oozing out of every word.

Lady Matilda humbly lowered her gaze to the floor, but you could clearly tell she was radiating confidence.

Queen Henrietta elegantly spread her fan open, pressing it over her mouth. She gave a slow nod. "I will consider the offer."

The venue erupted in an even louder clamor this time as the people who were gathered acted genuinely stunned. Anyone who was close to the queen obtained great influence. In other words, the viscountess had gained recognition as someone who might be allowed the privilege to serve the royal family. Many shot questioning looks at the queen. I shared their sentiments; I couldn't read what she was thinking either.

Lady Matilda glanced my way, eyes full of scorn as she regarded me.

The two soon curtsied and excused themselves, taking to a corner of the party where their lively socializing commenced. No doubt the topic of their conversations included that which intrigued women the

most—clothing. A crowd of others swarmed around them, looking for the opportunity to get close to Lady Matilda now that she had shown some promise in diplomacy.

In my periphery, I could see Queen Henrietta sighing behind the shadow of her folding fan. The wave of people coming to pay their respects had just tapered off when she remarked, “The insects have slunk out of their hiding hole.”

My heart drummed in my chest—a feeling I’d been experiencing a lot lately.

Agnes stood close to the queen, rigid as a statue without betraying a single hint of emotion. “Shall I take care of the matter?”

“Now there’s an idea...” Her Majesty murmured, stroking her fingers along the frame of her fan thoughtfully. “But let’s just keep an eye out for now.”

As I loitered beside her, the queen’s gaze turned to me. She studied me before letting out an imperceptible sigh. “...Elianna, your hair is coming loose. Go have it fixed.”

“Your Majesty,” I started to say, but my voice trailed off when I couldn’t come up with the words. There were eyes all around us, so I just swallowed my explanations back down. At a maid’s prompting, I curtsied and left, still carrying confusion and unease close in my heart.

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I sat alone in a powder room located a short distance from the main room and let a heavy sigh spill out. One of the queen’s maids had guided me here. Before she bowed and took her leave, she told me, “Please call for me when you’re ready to return.”

I understood that the queen was giving me this time to think alone. She couldn’t have me sitting beside her as the guest of honor with such a miserable look on my face.

A trickle of gay music filtered into the room as I stared at my pitiful reflection in the mirror. “The insects have slunk out of their hiding hole,” the queen had said. Perhaps that was her way of answering the suspicions I harbored toward Viscountess Dauner and her daughter. The design on their dresses had been no coincidence. I wasn’t imagining things. They had stolen the very ideas I casually shared just a few days earlier. This was clear proof that someone close to me was leaking my information.

It could be anyone: a royal merchant, a maid, an attendant, a court lady, or one of the guards. The moment I let doubt creep in, there was no end to whom I might suspect. Just thinking about it made me utterly miserable. I was staying in the capital until the end of the Holy Night’s Banquet, but now I had to be wary of the very people who were supposed to be taking care of me here. Perhaps this

was a trial, since I would someday be the one overseeing the inner palace. Or maybe this was something that just naturally occurred because of my own incompetence?

My thoughts turned gloomy and depressing, and I felt utterly hopeless. What really weighed on me was the way the queen looked at me and sighed. I couldn't help but wonder if she thought me pathetic and unfit for Prince Christopher.

I tightened my fingers around my knees. I could hear women's voices approaching, accompanied by the faint murmur of music from the party. Sensing a group of them, I decided to lift myself out of my chair.

My thoughts and emotions were still in disarray. I didn't want anyone to see me looking so miserable. I planned to slip into the adjoining room, but then I spotted the special passageway the servants had been using. Deciding it was too late to stop now, I hiked up the unwieldy train of my dress and shuffled inside.

I passed through a room that was more like a hallway, avoiding people as I went and feeling like a rat scuttling through the dark in the process. I sailed forward. There was nothing—neither a person nor an obstacle—that could stop me. I flew through the halls as if I were being pursued by something, stopping only when I had reached the main palace.

The frigid winter air felt like a cold blade stabbing at my hot throat. My breath came out in visible puffs, and the chill drew me back to my senses. I had to go back.

Faintly, I could hear voices. "...right, Prince Christopher?"

My heart slammed against my rib cage, thundering louder now than it ever had before. I instinctively turned in the direction of those voices. I found myself peeking out of a second floor corridor, peering down at the floor below. Light spilled through the dark, reflecting off a head of brilliant gold hair. Not far from the prince was one of the imperial guards that accompanied him. The two were just about to slip into a hallway when a voice had stopped them—or at least, that was how it appeared. He was conversing with the female knight from the Miseral Dukedom. I recalled she'd said her name was Lady Elen.

I unconsciously leaned forward to catch snippets of their conversation, which was largely drowned out by the surrounding hubbub.

"...would like to deliver her answer..." Lady Elen's lustrous voice cut through the darkness, finding its way up to me.

There was a small burst of scornful laughter, carrying a chill with it that seemed to seep right into my bones. "Me? Do you know how uncertain I felt as I waited for this, oh Lady Knight of Miseral?" The prince's voice was more impressive than hers, sugary sweet despite

the menacing undertone.

Lady Elen gave a shrug, brushing off his icy reception. "If you're angry with me, then it's misdirected. I'm merely an envoy." She slipped a missive out of her pocket and held it out to him. "From Lady Mireille."

I heard the sound of someone sucking in a breath and didn't realize at first that it was me doing it.

His Highness evaluated the proffered letter quietly, almost as if it were completely irrelevant to him. The frazzled clamor of government officials moving about leaked out from a nearby office.

Unable to keep her mirth to herself, Lady Elen let a small chuckle slip. The next words they exchanged were in a whisper, and I couldn't catch them over the rest of the commotion. The only thing I was narrowly able to pick up was Lady Elen's voice as she said, "Lady Mireille was of the same mind, Prince Christopher."

After a beat of silence, I watched as the prince accepted the missive. When I swallowed, it felt like the cold was stabbing down my throat, trickling down into my chest and coalescing into a lump of hard ice. I was forced to watch as the whole scene unfolded, unable to breathe a word.



Chapter 3: The Butterflies' Intentions

“...and what remains in the Totti Caves are the oldest paintings of the Gel civilization. The most famous is the feast room with the painting of the gods’ banquet. Even now the colors remain pristine. It’s garnered attention because the techniques displayed revolutionized art during that time period. Those paintings are also famous for bringing the Gel civilization to light. Up until that point, their existence had been theorized but never proven. And that’s also why—oh, sorry, you already know all this. It’s like trying to teach a fish how to swim.” He reined in his excitement, forcing a bitter smile as he lifted his cup to his lips.

The woman who responded wore a faint smile. Her voice was unwavering as she continued for him, “In year 82 of the Ars Continent calendar, the Kaig Arg Empire to the north set forth on its quest to dominate the rest of the continent. The defeated nations were all forced to convert to Ryzanity, a monotheistic religion that condemned idolatry. As a result, existing symbols of other religions, be they temples, statues, or paintings, were all burned down, or so the history books tell us. If any of them had remained, they might have been the key to unlocking the origins of the Gel civilization. Or better yet, they could have given us a clue to understanding the biggest mystery on our continent—the Rimul people.” She chewed her lip in frustration.

The man who nodded in agreement was my elder brother, Alfred. The three of us were currently seated in the royal archives’ break room.

With nothing else to do, I had been spacing out in the archives when my brother and Lady Anna appeared, intending to return some materials. Since we happened to bump into each other, we decided to settle down for a bit of tea.

Lady Anna was the only daughter of Earl Hayden, who ruled over Edea, a border region of Sauslind. The two of us became acquainted at the Autumn Hunting Festival, and she was now working at the History Compilation Department. During our breaks, we would often meet here to enthuse about history together.

The reason for my brother’s addition was likely because the Bernsteins were drawn to people who possessed knowledge, like Lady Anna. His normally soft expression turned serious when discussing antiquity. “The empire was at the peak of its prosperity when it

conquered its neighbors, remaining at the height of its glory for over a century. That was unmistakably the most difficult period for the other civilizations inhabiting the continent. It's unbelievable how much art was destroyed during all of that! I won't claim monotheistic religions are evil, but I can't sympathize with believing your faith is so superior that everything else must be destroyed."

Lady Anna gave a silent nod. "Cultures blending together and merging to give birth to new cultures is common throughout history. However, any teaching that would convince a person to destroy other civilizations and erase them completely is pure insanity in my eyes. Whether the empire's century-long reign was a long one or a short one is still contested, but personally, I think the collapse of the empire's vastly overexpanded dominion and wealth was inevitable."

"Yes," Alfred agreed thoughtfully. "There were many circumstances and domestic issues that resulted in the fall of the empire. One of those elements was that the countries under their rule had begun to accumulate power. Actually, after that, we had a king here in Sauslind who attempted to replicate the empire's success by trying to conquer the continent again."

"King Rudolph, you mean." Her lips spread into a grin. The two of us had shared a conversation before about that very same man.

I flashed Lady Anna a smile of my own.

My brother's soft, ashen gray eyes drifted over to me, and he let a bitter chuckle slip. "Well, we kind of got derailed into empire history, but the presence of the Totti Cave paintings in Norn are proof of the Gaelga mythology. It's a bit unusual for you to express interest in cave paintings, though, Eli. Is Uncle Andrew's influence finally taking hold?"

Seeing his gentle smile, I lightly shook my head. "No, I was just doing a little research."

At the confusion on Lady Anna's face, my brother explained, "Andrew is our father's younger brother and an archaeologist. He found his purpose in life by conducting investigations and excavations across the continent. He's only able to come see us about once a year, but both Eli and I have always loved listening to his stories. If I weren't the family's heir apparent, I'd love to go off on archaeological adventures like my uncle."

"Oh, my." Lady Anna's eyes widened, and then she giggled. "Well, that certainly does sound like it would be interesting." Her expression suddenly sobered. "That's right, I heard that in recent years, Norn has gotten itself into a precarious situation. Conflict is expanding within the old empire's territory, and it's only a matter of time before Norn gets swept up in it as well."

"Their former queen was originally from one of the territories

previously held by the empire,” Alfred explained. “The northeastern part of the Ars Continent has been a rather unstable region, cycling in and out of the empire’s control. Fortunately, Sauslind has the northeastern mountain range to act as a shield, thereby protecting them from getting wrapped up in the conflict.”

“Indeed. Lady Elianna, were you feeling uneasy because you suspected the Totti Cave paintings might be in danger if Norn was dragged into war?” Lady Anna’s eyes gazed at me earnestly.

My heart prickled with pain. She was concerned because war could result in the loss of valuable historical artifacts. If she knew that my own careless statements might have contributed to and sped up the process, what would she think of me? Lady Anna was from the Edea Domain, a place ravaged countless times by war.

My mind whirled with things I could potentially say. If we were still discussing history, as we had before, I was sure I could come up with something. But right now, I was too terrified to even open my mouth.

Lady Anna’s brows furrowed as she regarded me suspiciously.

After setting his cup down and standing up, my brother studied my face. “Eli?” His gentle hands combed my hair back, his expression warm as he peered into my eyes. The soft color of his ashen gray ones revealed just how concerned he was for me. “You’re not your usual self. What’s wrong?”

“Alfred...”

Despite his busy schedule, my brother had constantly come to check up on me during my stay in the palace. Our father, given the nature of his position, understandably didn’t have the luxury of being able to come see me. At the end of every year, he was always so overwhelmed with work that we couldn’t go home, so instead he stayed in the palace just like me.

I knew I couldn’t trouble my brother with my problems, but when I tried to shake my head, his gentle smile stopped me. “The only times you want to drink cocoa with me are when something is bothering you. Go ahead and tell me. What’s going on?”

Suddenly, I recalled how I used to fling myself at my brother and sob into his arms when I was younger, but then I remembered I was no longer in a position where I could do that.

I noticed Lady Anna trying to move out of her seat to give us some privacy and quickly spoke up. “I’m all right. Um...I was just thinking I should speak to His Highness about something, though. I...I’m sorry, Alfred.”

“If you’re sure...” His eyes had a lonely hue to them, but he continued stroking my head nonetheless, mumbling to himself. “I wonder if you’re feeling relieved now that your wedding date has

been decided.” I tilted my head, but he merely smiled softly in reply. “I’m a little sad that you can’t rely on me anymore, but if there’s anything I can do, no matter what it is, just say the word. Father and I have no attachment to working here at the palace.”

I stared at him, my eyes blank. My brother was an essential assistant to the prime minister. I even heard he was being considered for a cabinet nomination in the future. Those who desired success would be envious of his position. Yet, as always, my brother held no interest in power, and that made my heart feel lighter. It warmed me to think he was more concerned about me than his own rank.

In a subdued voice, Lady Anna added further reassurance by saying, “If...there’s anything I can do to help, I would be more than happy to, Lady Elianna.”

My shoulders sagged with relief at their words. Finally, I was able to flash a genuine smile at the both of them. “I know. Thank you, Alfred, Lady Anna.”

They each gave me a warm smile in response, and my heart felt much calmer.

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When break time was over, Lady Anna returned to work. Though before she even had the opportunity to leave, a teary-eyed subordinate of my brother’s came to drag him away. As for me, I assisted the archives’ staff in tidying up the shelves.

The curator, Prince Theodore, was preoccupied with his duties as the king’s younger brother right now due to the approaching holiday. Such duties included: meeting with prominent figures from other countries, acting as the peoples’ representative at meetings, and assisting with preparations for the Holy Night’s Banquet.

Ordinarily, I would be meeting with the queen’s entourage of married noblewomen in order to further preparations for my wedding in the spring, but after the events of the other night, my meetings with the royal merchants were temporarily suspended. I knew I wasn’t supposed to rejoice about that, but I couldn’t help it. Rather than drowning in heaps of glittering jewels, I could bury myself in the scent of books instead. That brought me great peace of mind.

While I was taking the initiative to help organize older tomes, Lord Alexei appeared with a mountain of documents in his arms. As part of the prince’s inner circle, he was naturally just as busy as everyone else, which only seemed to heighten his frightening intensity. He pushed off some odd jobs on me, and it was clear by the air around him he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

I took the documents and records he handed me and made rounds to the appropriate sections to deliver them, getting a taste for what it

was like to be a slaving public official. All sorts of people were entrusting me different kinds of documents and correspondences. Soon enough my arms were loaded down with books to be returned and stacks of documents that towered high enough to obstruct my vision. I suspected most of the people didn't realize it was me they were piling all of this work on. They were all too frantic to get everything done before the end of the year.

Shouldn't they hire some temporary help to smooth the process? I wondered. Although, I suppose that holds its own risk of confidential information being leaked, just like what happened to me. Still, the prince's policies are...

It was as I strode down the hallway, entertaining such thoughts, that I heard some theatrical voices echoing further ahead. Past the pillar of papers in my hands, I could see several noble ladies. They appeared to be headed toward the inner palace's greenhouse, which had been opened to the nobles for the winter. I hesitated for a moment but then finally moved to the side of the hallway so they could pass, just as the court ladies working at the palace always did.

One of the cheerful voices sounded familiar, and when I chanced a peek, I realized it was Lady Sharon. She was chattering away with someone just a short distance ahead, their voices echoing. I didn't recognize the lady she was speaking with.

"So then, Lady Sharon, Lord Glen doesn't view you as fiancée material?"

"Indeed. I do appreciate the countess being so gracious as to accept me, but I'm afraid I'll have to decline on behalf of her son. I hear he's rather popular among women, and I fear a child like myself wouldn't be able to satisfy him," said Lady Sharon.

"Oh dear... Is that so?"

They spoke in conspiratorial whispers, but I could still hear how lively their conversation was.

Lord Glen was the son of Earl Eisenach, the general of the imperial guard. He was also in the imperial guard himself, as a bodyguard to the prince. He had an impressive lineage and a promising future ahead of him, which made him widely sought after by unmarried noble ladies.

Judging from what I had heard the other day, it seemed as if both families had agreed to this engagement, but apparently the two in question were of a different mind. Perhaps Lord Glen *did* have a way out of this after all then.

As I considered that, the girls began gushing about something else—their partners for the Holy Night's Banquet. I could understand their excitement. The banquet hailed both the end of one year and the beginning of another. It held a particularly special meaning for those

who were still single. The partner they paired up with there would be more meaningful than one they picked for a regular evening party—it would be someone whose future was assured, or so the custom went.

Lady Sharon's carefree voice hushed the other girls. "Someone mature like you or these other ladies here would be a far better match for Lord Glen, Lady Matilda. If you would like my assistance, I would be happy to help in any way I can."

"Oh my," the other girls squealed in delight.

When I realized the person with her was Lady Matilda, I blinked my eyes in surprise. Her dress had drawn so much of my attention the other night that I hadn't remembered her face.

Lady Matilda seemed a bit guarded as she replied, "So the reason you came to Sauslind was to participate in the Holy Night's Banquet then?"

"Yes!" Lady Sharon blurted eagerly. "But not the only reason. I came to do a little 'insect repelling,' if you will."

After a few beats of silence, Lady Matilda let out a shrill laugh. I couldn't help flinching behind my tower of documents as I stood there. Lady Matilda hurriedly pressed her fan over her face to stifle her giggling. "I see then, Lady Sharon. I think the two of us will get along swimmingly."

"Oh, I think so too," Lady Sharon responded innocently.

Her bodyguard, Lady Elen, followed behind the young lady, a troubled smile on her face. When her forest green eyes wandered over to where I stood at the edge of the hallway, she looked startled.

Feeling awkward, I shrunk in on myself. This wasn't exactly the most appropriate position for someone to find me in, given I was the betrothed of the crown prince. Unfortunately, the palace was short on helping hands.

I froze in place, worried the others might turn their attention as well, but Lady Elen's surprise melted into a smile, which she quickly suppressed. She gave a polite but subdued nod as their group passed me by. I let out a shaky breath, relieved they were gone. Grateful to Lady Elen for not saying anything, I started forward again.

Given Lady Sharon's age, I didn't think she would be allowed to attend the banquet. I wasn't even sure when she had become acquainted with Lady Matilda either. *The world sure does move fast*, I thought, my mind an incoherent jumble.

Then there was the matter of Lady Mireille Olphein Flan. Currently she was known as Lady Ramond, but she had once nearly been engaged to Prince Christopher. When the prince was fifteen and officially recognized as the crown prince, the nobles caused a stink about him not having a fiancée. Lady Mireille was the most prominent of the selected candidates. Someone was kind enough to inform me of

all of this when I was selected as his betrothed four years ago.

People wondered, “Why did the prince choose the Bibliophile Princess over Miseral’s Pearl Princess?” Back then, I genuinely thought I was merely a placeholder, so it didn’t even bother me. I could have easily responded, “I’m sure His Highness has his reasons.”

What about now, though?

I could feel his connection to Lady Mireille, and it made my heart pound with anxiety. A sigh spilled past my lips.

Right then, a voice spoke out in front of me. “That looks heavy. Allow me to assist.”

From behind my tower of documents, I could see a young man wearing a uniform that indicated he worked here in the palace. I hurriedly stepped out of his reach. “No, I’m fine. I appreciate the thought.” Some of these papers were specifically addressed to the prince. Given the confidentiality required, I couldn’t hand them over to just anyone.

“No need to hold back on my account.”

“I’d rather not. I don’t know you,” I insisted, as the two of us fell into a verbal tug-of-war.

Suddenly his tone turned dejected and forlorn. “I get you can’t recognize me when I’m in disguise, but just how forgettable am I if you can’t even recognize me when I’m in uniform...? It’s Alan, Lady Elianna.”

“Huh...?” I craned my neck for another look. Sure enough, I saw the honey-colored hair and emerald green eyes of our master musician, his face drawn dark and dispirited. “Oh goodness, Lord Alan. My apologies. I was just lost in thought.”

He let out a dry chuckle before muttering, “Just how invisible am I to you...?” He sighed wistfully before lifting half of the documents out of my hands. Then he muttered to himself, “This is a lot of paperwork. Is this some kind of silent protest?” His calculating eyes turned back toward me. “You said you were lost in thought. Was it about Prince Chris?”

His guess was so accurate I was at a loss for words. At the same time, I found myself curious about something. At His Highness’s order, Lord Alan was keeping a watchful eye on me. His timing made me wonder if he had been spying on Lady Matilda and Lady Sharon.

“Um...” As soon as the word left my mouth, I realized how pathetic this was. I couldn’t burden the prince with my concerns. “Could you keep it a secret from His Highness?”

Lord Alan looked surprised. “I’m fairly certain the prince would have some words for me if I tried to keep something from him regarding you, my lady.”

I started, realizing how silly my request was—feeling flustered I’d

even mentioned it. Lord Alan had his own duties. I couldn't intervene with those for my own private affairs. "Yes, my apologies..." My heart sank as I lowered my gaze.

"Um..." Lord Alan tried to keep his tone upbeat as he peered over at me. "This thing that you don't want Prince Chris to know about, is it that troublesome noble lady? Or is it something else?"

The question made me realize something. Though I didn't want the prince to realize just how weak minded I was, given Lord Alan's duties, His Highness might already be aware of what happened before at the evening party. My mood soured; I felt even more miserable now. Not wanting to face the emotional storm brewing within, I decided to change the subject. "Is Earl Dauner doubling down?"

Earl Dauner was Lady Matilda's father. His alignment with the faction that wanted to strengthen our military was widely known. He was the troublemaker the prince had mentioned just the other day. Admittedly, the man didn't hold enough power by himself to sway the direction of the country, but one would be remiss to belittle the influence of his words.

"Mmm," Lord Alan hummed, a troubled look on his face.

I knew it. His reaction answered my question. My heart seemed to shut itself down as I dropped my gaze back to the floor. I used to think if my ideas helped the country flourish, then I wouldn't mind even if someone else took credit for those achievements. However, if my ideas were being used by Earl Dauner and the militaristic faction, it could be disastrous. The reason I had cautioned against mass sales of those dresses was because of how foreign countries might view it—the flower was native to Norn and it could give the wrong impression about our relationship with them. Other countries might think we were planning to do a military intervention into the northeastern conflict zone.

This was especially problematic given that my wedding to Prince Christopher was planned for the spring; we had more foreign diplomats visiting than ever before. The need for discretion was greater now than it had ever been. And yet my own lack of discretion had landed us in this predicament.

I lamented how careless my words had been. It was enough of a shock that someone had utilized my words for their own ends, but more than anything, I felt ashamed I had indirectly contributed to a faction that was obstructing the prince politically.

"Oh, Lady Elianna," Lord Alan called cheerfully. "We're kind of focused on something else at the moment, so we'll have to deal with that matter later. But don't worry about it. We'll keep the demon lord off our a—I mean, Prince Chris will take care of it."

In other words, the prince was protecting me just as he always

did. Queen Henrietta had warned me numerous times that things couldn't go on like this. I felt so defeated. My thoughts became a gloomy cloud, and I had to strain my lips taut to keep from crying. As much as I lamented, the situation wasn't going to change.

I have to get it together, I told myself, trying to rein my feelings in.

Lord Alan gave a strained laugh, forcing himself to smile. "You really are too serious for your own good. I wouldn't want you to be as domineering as the prince...but you could stand to be a little more self-assured."

I lifted my eyes to meet his, curious what he meant by that.

He wore his usual boyish expression on his face. "I'm sorry that there are things I can't tell you without Prince Chris's permission, but you don't have to suffer in silence. It's his own fault he's so busy right now. If something is on your mind, just lay it on him." There was a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Also, you shouldn't make that kind of face around other men. The prince might kill me."

Face? What face is he talking about?

I blinked, bewildered by his comment. Nonetheless, I did understand he was looking out for me, much like an older brother. My regret turned even darker and heavier, but I swallowed back the tears and summoned the willpower to force a smile back at him.

After that, the two of us shared some light banter as he tried to liven my spirits. Since we had split the stack of paperwork I was carrying, we had to part ways eventually.

My heart felt warm from all the reassurance everyone had given me, and with that, I headed to the prince's office.

Images from that night lingered in the back of my mind. I knew I had to consult His Highness about my fears, but meeting him was so terrifying that I had actively avoided his work space since this morning. Only now had I sucked up the courage to step in front of the door to his office.

Sadly...His Highness was out.

The guard in front of the door was happy enough to let me in, but to my dismay, the man I was looking for was not inside. In spite of his absence, I had already been given permission to come and go in order to do my reading or deliver documents, so the guard showed no hesitation in letting me in.

I felt simultaneously relieved and discouraged as I trailed deeper in. The place felt lonely without Prince Christopher. Mountains of documents were strewn about the desk in a disorderly fashion. I drew my brows together, wondering if he even had time to take breaks right now.

Not wanting to hinder his work, I decided to leave the documents I'd carried. Sadly, my attempt caused an avalanche. I rushed to

restrain the falling stack, and for a moment, my gaze swept over something.

To Prince Christopher Selkirk Ashelard.

There, amid the sea of documents, was a letter in elegant penmanship—a woman's penmanship. I already had a good hunch as to who had sent it. My heart twisted with guilt as I stared, unable to draw my eyes away from the missive with its broken seal.

Chapter 4: Pests

A soft sigh escaped my lips. And then my body jumped and I broke out of my reverie, lifting my eyes up.

Agnes, who had been explaining the procedures for the Holy Night's Banquet, tucked the documents she was holding away. "You seem to be distracted, Lady Elianna."

When she pointed out my lack of concentration, I felt so guilty I apologized.

We were currently seated in my private quarters in the palace. Agnes sat across from me, not moving an inch as she accurately guessed what was weighing on me. "You must be concerned about what the queen suggested before, the harem issue."

My throat bobbed as I swallowed. I wasn't good at expressing myself with words.

She waited a moment then prefaced by saying, "I'll tell you this since I don't think the queen will mention it herself..." I lifted my gaze, and our eyes met. "The reason Viscountess Dauner is trying so hard to promote her daughter is because she wants Lady Matilda to live out the dream she couldn't have."

"Pardon...?"

"The viscountess was one of the women being considered as a candidate for future queen. Back then, many people said the only reason she'd lost to Queen Henrietta was because Her Majesty had more political support. When the issue came up of creating a harem, the viscountess was already married, but there was still talk of her possibly divorcing."

I blinked in surprise. I'd known since four years ago that Viscountess Dauner was trouble. She was always trying to compete with the queen at every turn—at tea parties, evening parties, and any other such social events. Her Majesty didn't think too fondly of the other woman, but for political reasons, she was cautious and deliberate in how she handled the viscountess.

Agnes quietly analyzed the situation. "Once your reputation was established and you'd displayed your formidable intelligence, the Dauner family eased off a bit. However, Marquess Bernstein has been cracking down on the military budget yearly, and as a result, those in the military are less than pleased with him. Now Earl Dauner is arguing heatedly and going after His Highness in hopes of restoring

balance to the inner palace by having a harem established and his granddaughter accepted into it.”

My heart seized as icy fingers constricted tightly around it. My father was a cabinet minister acting as the Minister of Finance, and I had heard for a while now that he wasn’t seeing eye to eye with those in the army who insisted we needed a stronger military presence. I understood that keeping a harem was one way to maintain harmony, but...

Agnes’s eyes studied me questioningly. “Well, Lady Elianna, what will you do?”

“What do you mean...?”

“You have read the history books. You already know how this goes. You didn’t need the queen to point it out to you. Historically, harems have been essential, regardless of whether there was an heir or not. Are you willing to accept the prince’s harem?”

“I—” My mouth opened before I could stop myself, but I managed to grip my knees and swallow back the rest of the words.

Ever since I had spoken with Queen Henrietta, I’d carried these emotions with me. Hideous, selfish emotions. I wondered if it was okay for me to voice them. Was I really allowed to, when all I did was drag the prince down like an extra weight on his back? My lips pulled into a tight line.

The ensuing silence gave me the impression Agnes wasn’t waiting for an answer; she was waiting for my emotions to cool down.

Her voice was hushed as she said, “There’s one more thing.”

I didn’t realize it, but at some point I had closed my eyes. When I opened them, I noticed her peering over at me. Meaningful silence stretched between the two of us.

“Someone leaked what you shared with the merchants in confidence. Do you suspect any of the maids in the inner palace?”

I didn’t even stop to consider the answer; I just blurted it out on instinct. “No.”

In the back of my mind, I pictured Sarah and the other young maids working in the inner palace. Since I first became the prince’s fiancée four years ago, I had grown to understand the hearts of the people at the palace. Those employed here were either people who had lost loved ones to the Ashen Nightmare fifteen years ago or women and children from families who no longer had a breadwinner to care for them.

The palace was the face of our country. When I realized back then that the royal family had prioritized those in crisis, it really struck a chord with me. For that reason, regardless of whether I was a mere placeholder or not, I swore I would never do anything to embarrass His Highness or the royal family. Those feelings remained steadfast,

even now that I no longer thought of myself as a fake fiancée.

“None of those women would betray someone from the royal family. Even if one of them were to begrudge me for any reason, I don’t believe they would ever do anything that might tarnish Her Majesty’s good name.” Because inevitably, any faux pas I made would become the queen’s responsibility since she oversaw the inner palace.

Perhaps my conviction that they were innocent was wishful thinking. I couldn’t say with absolute certainty that none of them had done it, but I wanted to believe in them. I knew the world wasn’t perfect. I unfortunately understood not everyone who pledged fealty kept their vow. Indeed, I had once suspected the maids myself. But when Agnes asked me, the word “no” came out all on its own because those were my true feelings. Someone might call me naive or idealistic, but what king leads a country without believing in and showing consideration for his people?

“One cannot be a monarch and hope to accomplish anything if they hesitate and question whether they have traitors in their midst. They must consider what they can do for their people first and foremost, not preoccupy themselves with concerns of how other people view them. Only those who adhere to such a standard are fit to sit the throne, in my opinion.” After I spoke the words, my body seized with a realization. *They shouldn’t preoccupy themselves with concerns of how other people view them.*

Laughter erupted across from me. When I peered over at her, I saw that Agnes’s normally emotionless mask had slipped into an amused grin. Other giggles echoed through the room, and I soon realized they came from maids stationed nearby.

My cheeks heated up. I certainly sounded arrogant saying all of that when I’d accomplished nothing myself.

“Lady Elianna.” The mirth had drained from Agnes’s face, but the area around her eyes crinkled softly. “You have your own strengths. Please never forget that.”

“I’m sorry...?” I couldn’t help asking for clarification. Other people seemed to insist on some supposed inner strength, but I still wasn’t seeing it in myself. Perhaps if I knew what it was, I wouldn’t feel so anxious.

However, Agnes readjusted her posture and reapplied her usual mask, drawing out the documents she had temporarily stowed away. It was clear the conversation was over. I followed her example and gave up on pursuing the matter, deciding instead to focus on what we were originally discussing.

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There were a lot of emotions within me that I had yet to properly

work out, but I couldn't put this off any longer. I steeled myself and headed to the prince's office.

Ultimately, I ran off yesterday after finding that letter on his desk. I managed to attend the evening dinner with the foreign ambassadors, but His Highness had been so busy the two of us had yet to meet. That came as both a disappointment and relief; I wanted to see the prince, but I was also afraid of seeing him. There was so much I needed to talk to him about—what my gaffe with the merchants and the Yule flower meant, what had transpired at the evening party, and how things were playing out within the palace. Yet the one thing I couldn't shake from my mind was the prince's name written in that woman's penmanship. Anxiety roiled in the pit of my stomach over a woman I had never even met before.

If I saw the prince right now, what nonsense might I blurt out? Bibliophile Princess though I might be, I knew I couldn't keep avoiding this. If I didn't act, then it would be as if nothing had changed since the incident this past spring—when I'd happened to see what looked like him being intimate with another woman and then made incorrect assumptions without verifying anything.

Things were different now. I had promised His Highness this past summer that I wouldn't doubt his feelings anymore. I was determined to meet with him and speak about this. Inwardly, I chided myself for my own cowardice as I stepped up to his office.

The guard standing watch happily opened the door for me as he always did. Judging by the air around him, I could tell that the prince was currently inside. There was a short corridor leading into the main office room, and I paused there to take a deep breath. I was deciding in my head what order we should discuss things in, as well as whether or not I should bring up Lady Mireille.

It's weighing on your mind, so you need to talk to him, I thought, my hands gathering into fists. *But... Still, what if...* Even though I had come all the way here, apprehension still filtered across my face.

As I froze right before the inner door leading to the office, it suddenly cracked open. The chamberlain came waltzing out with paperwork cradled in his arms. This chamberlain worked specifically for His Highness and was a senior member of the staff. He spotted me and gave a friendly smile. I could hear the sound of the prince's voice on the other side of the door.

"...There was an incident at the Tessen River's construction site?" His grave voice continued, inquiring about the current status of the location.

"One of the support beams for the bridge girder collapsed," Lord Alexei explained. "A few people were injured. The one in charge there is Lord Wilson. He's young and doesn't have much experience, so

perhaps they lack proper leadership.”

“No, Wilson is from the Azul Region. The people there respect him, and he has Greg, a veteran, assisting him. I don’t think it’s a personnel failure,” said the prince.

“I know you’ve taken an interest in supporting Lord Wilson because you approve of his vision. But you should consider the possibility that his ambitions may be fruitless.”

After that short exchange between the prince and Lord Alexei, silence fell as His Highness seemed to contemplate his next course of action. The chamberlain lingered in the doorway, peering back as if he was waiting for his liege to give him orders.

I could hear His Highness’s chair squeak as he stood up. “I want to visit the location myself. Alex, adjust my schedule. Glen, ready the horses.”

“What?!” Lord Glen gasped in disbelief. “You seriously intend to head to the Azul Region *now*? What are you going to do about the Holy Night’s Banquet?!”

“I only need three days to make a round trip. We’ll have plenty of time. Plus, it’ll raise morale if I go there myself. Now quit whining and get to it!”

“Another grueling death march...” Lord Glen groaned, voice thick with despair.

Lord Alexei already sounded like he was battling an oncoming headache as he admonished the prince. “There’s no reason for you to go yourself,” he started to say, though his voice was cut off when the door peeled fully open and the chamberlain stepped aside.

“Eli!” the prince gasped. His face and voice filled with joy upon seeing me. In the next instant, I found my vision obstructed by the fabric of his shirt, and a familiar scent flooded my nose. It took me a moment to register the prince’s steady breathing and the solid arms that had suddenly wrapped around me.

“Y-Your Highness...” Panicked, I wriggled around in his grip, but he strengthened his hold in order to trap me.

A dreary sigh drifted down from his lips. “This just isn’t enough. I need more of you...”

He pulled me closer to his chest. I could hear the sound of his heartbeat and feel the warmth of his body roll over me. For a second, I forgot to breathe.

He sounded miserable, struggling to contain his emotion as he said, “We’re both in the palace all the time. Why is it I never get to see you? Is this some kind of conspiracy? A scheme? I was getting desperate, Eli. I almost asked Glen to teach me his techniques for sneaking into girls’ rooms at night.”

Excuse me? I squirmed.

From behind the prince I could hear Lord Glen grumble, “Don’t say that, you make me sound like a creep!”

Lord Alexei seemed equally exasperated. “What kind of conspiracy would that be? Besides, Your Highness, *you* are the one who said—”

I could already picture the vein bulging on his forehead as he spoke, but the prince clamped his hands over my ears before I could hear everything Lord Alexei had to say.

His Highness sighed. “Intervening between two lovers is very unbecoming of you both. You’re pests. This is precisely why you were only allotted a little girl as your betrothed, Glen. And why you’re treated like the arctic tundra that no one wants to approach, Alexei. What you do in your daily lives speaks volumes, does it not, Eli?”

I’m afraid I’m not following.

“Um, Y-Your Highness...”

Lord Glen and Lord Alexei seemed to have more they wanted to say. I could hear their voices, but I was too flustered trying to deal with the man in front of me.

The prince breathed a resigned sigh and dropped his arms, straightening himself. He ignored the others behind him as he regarded me with a gentle look in his eyes. “I’m sorry I haven’t had any time for you lately, Eli. I never anticipated I would be this loaded down with work. I promise I’ll make some time before the new year’s break.”

I gawked at him, puzzled. Why did he act as if we had such a limited amount of time?

There was so much I had to speak with him about, but sensing the urgency, I hesitated to keep him. Perhaps one of the reasons for his busy schedule was the problem I had created. Plus, I heard mention of there being an accident with people injured. That was more pressing. I couldn’t stop him purely on account of my personal anxieties; he needed to see the conditions there for himself.

And yet...my hand seemed to have a mind of its own, gripping tightly at the hem of his shirt.

His Highness blinked before smiling warmly at me. His hand caressed my cheek. “Are you lonely, Eli?”

“...Ngh.” I felt my cheeks warm as I released my grip on him. I tried to step back to get out of his way, but he pulled me toward him.

Our faces were close as those sweet, blue eyes peered into mine. He opened his mouth to say something, but the other two hidden behind him interrupted us.

“If we’re gonna go, let’s get going,” said Lord Glen. “The sun sets quickly in the winter.”

“Indeed,” Lord Alexei agreed. “I’m afraid your work has piled up. If you have the free time to shower your betrothed with attention,

then hurry up and finish the rest of your duties.”

The prince’s sleek brows drew together, and he clicked his tongue. My heart was still pounding in my chest as he drew his hands away and released me.

I composed myself once I heard the sound of him sighing again.

His vibrant eyes turned back toward me. “Eli, it seems some mosquitoes have appeared despite the season. I’ll have to go take down some pests. Don’t worry, I’ve already made my move. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Your Highness...”

So the prince already knew about it after all, I realized. Now I felt even more worthless than before.

His gentle hand brushed over my hair. I knew I couldn’t trouble him any more than I already had, though, so I swallowed back my self-pity and forced a smile. “Thank you, Your Highness. Please be careful and return safely.”

“Yes, I apologize for being in such a hurry, but I’ll be back soon.”

He reluctantly released his hold on my hair. Lord Glen and Lord Alexei followed behind him as they hastily left the room.

Finally, I was able to meet the prince, and yet as I stood there alone, my heart felt even heavier than it had before.

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The next day, Lady Sharon requested some of my time in order to consult me about Lord Glen, so I invited her to visit me in my private quarters in the palace. She arrived with Lady Elen in tow, and as my maids poured our tea, they kept stealing glances over at the lady knight.

I was bewildered as to why they were so enamored with someone of the same gender, but I focused instead on exchanging pleasantries with Lady Sharon for a while. At first, Lady Sharon wore an adorable smile on her face as she interacted with me, but soon that faded as she blinked at me in confusion, growing gradually more and more perplexed at the course of our conversation.

Finally, she gave me a strange look as she asked, “Um, Lady Elianna, this is an extremely technical discussion. Might I ask who told you I had an interest in gardening?” Her verdant green eyes shuttered open and closed as she grappled with her own bewilderment. “I’ve heard the winters in Sauslind are harsher than the dukedom, but I’m not sure how this conversation on insect repellent really applies to me...”

“Oh...” I felt completely embarrassed. I had heard her speak before about how she’d come here to repel insects, so I’d just assumed she was interested in the topic. I must have misunderstood her.

Lady Elen was struggling to keep herself from exploding in laughter. Lady Sharon pinned her with a suspicious look before abruptly instructing her to step outside and make sure no one interrupted. Sensing she was ready to speak about Lord Glen now, I also dismissed my maids from the room for privacy.

Lady Elen hesitated, her eyes boring into Lady Sharon as she lingered at the door. The latter kept a composed look on her face as she said in a clipped voice, “I need to consult Lady Elianna about something. Leave, Elen.”

Now that the two of us were alone, Lady Sharon flashed an endearing grin at me. I met her gaze as I wracked my brain for ideas on what I could possibly do to help her in this engagement, one she wasn’t even interested in.

She then surprised me by suddenly saying, “I hate beating around the bush, Lady Elianna.”

“All right?” I was about to nod in agreement but found myself puzzled when the air around her suddenly changed.

She kept the adorable smile as she spoke. “There’s not much time, so I’m going to get straight to the point. I would like you to relinquish your position as Prince Christopher’s partner to the Holy Night’s Banquet and let me have the honors instead.”

“E-Excuse me...?”

“If he goes with someone from the Miseral Dukedom, people will understand that he’s showing special regard to Lady Mireille. Considering how things are going to unfold, I think this is the best course of action.”

I couldn’t even count the number of times I blinked at her. “Um...Lady Sharon, I thought you wanted to consult me about being Lord Glen’s partner?”

She pulled a face, nose wrinkling.

I breathed a voiceless, “Huh?” in reply.

“I have no interest in Lord Glen,” she huffed. “I don’t care how promising his future may be, there’s no end to the number of ladies he’s been with. Besides, I don’t want to be with someone who comes from a whole family of redheads. We’d have a bunch of ginger babies together! Talk about a nightmare. Especially since my own red hair is... Wait, that’s enough about me.”

She cleared her throat and then tried again. “I realize you will be the next queen. News has already spread. Plus, Lady Mireille’s already been married once before—though it was an official arrangement, nothing shady. But if Lady Mireille were to marry Prince Christopher, things would return to the way they *should* be. You understand, don’t you?”

I gaped at her then struggled to swallow a breath. “Umm...what

do you mean by ‘things would return to the way they should be?’”

“Oh, come now. You’re as dense as you look. I gave you a hint about this already, didn’t I? Hasn’t Prince Christopher told you anything?”

“The prince?” I frantically worked my brain to try to put the pieces together, but I was coming up short.

Lady Sharon gave a sharp nod. “Yes, the *Yule Lovers*, it’s a love story between Prince Christopher and Lady Mireille. There was a princess and a prince of a neighboring country that had feelings for each other since they were young. The two promised to share their future together, but meddlers ripped the two apart. He had a fiancée thrust upon him that kept the two apart, and the princess was forced into marrying an older man. Just when the two seemed destined for a tragic end, people discovered that the princess was actually the Yule Maiden, beloved by the goddess. The goddess used her divine protection to shield the maiden’s purity. Then she dethroned the evil fiancée, and at last the princess and prince were able to marry and live happily ever after.” She clasped her hands together, clearly enamored with the story. The way she spoke about it so dreamily reminded me just how young she really was.

Meanwhile, I was making a world record for the number of blinks in a minute. I couldn’t even count them.

I was at a loss for how to respond. This was something I had never dealt with before. Granted, the way she seemed to cling to the story with such intense emotion did almost make me feel like she made a good case for why one shouldn’t immerse themselves too deeply in fiction lest they forget reality.

While I hesitated to respond, Lady Sharon returned to her senses and cleared her throat. “This book is wildly popular in the dukedom. Everyone knows it’s modeled after Prince Christopher and Lady Mireille. The people want them to get together and live as happily as in the tale. Besides, only six years ago, the two were on the cusp of an engagement. And for *some* strange reason, the proposal was dismissed and he ended up engaged to a lady from some house no one knew anything about! Everyone thinks it’s fishy.”

That makes sense, I realized, strangely impressed. The Bernsteins held no prominence; they were just a minor noble family full of book lovers. From a foreign country’s standpoint, perhaps it seemed suspicious someone like me from such an obscure family suddenly became the prince’s betrothed. It didn’t matter how much the prince had personally desired this. It still looked bizarre to their eyes.

“So you get it now, Lady Elianna?” She leaned forward. “You’re just fixing a broken relationship. Admittedly, I have heard you enjoy some popularity here within Sauslind. But you’ll be nothing more than

extra baggage to the prince. Please, release him to Lady Mireille and let them be happy together.”

“‘Release’ him?” I echoed.

“Yes.” She nodded without missing a beat. “Lady Mireille can handle other harem candidates and the nobles within the palace as well. Plus, the prince will enjoy the backing of the Miseral Dukedom. But what about you, Lady Elianna?”

I swallowed hard.

I’m just extra baggage weighing the prince down...?

Lady Sharon’s smile was both girlishly innocent and unintentionally cruel. “You can be a decoration, the official queen and the Bibliophile Princess who reads books all the time. Though, all the substantial work required of your position will be performed by Lady Mireille. Do you understand? Instead of being the pest that hampers true love, release Prince Christopher and let him be with the real heroine—Lady Mireille. Vacate your position and let her take her rightful place. That is the most appropriate end for this story.”

The look in her eyes made it clear she genuinely believed, without a shadow of doubt, this was the correct way for things to be. All I could do was gulp pathetically.

After that, Lady Sharon went on to discuss the details of her being the prince’s partner and how things would play out with him marrying Lady Mireille later on down the line. She seemed disappointed when I only gave her perfunctory replies, and she finally wrapped up the conversation by saying, “Just consider what I said,” and taking her leave.

I think I spent most of the time after that just staring off blankly. By the time I realized where I was, I was standing in front of one of the shelves in the royal archives. I had no idea when I’d even made the trip here.

I stared at the neat line of book covers. Normally, I could almost feel them breathing, as though they were speaking directly to me, but now I realized I couldn’t feel anything at all. This was something I had experienced once before when I was certain our engagement was going to be annulled.

There was an endless world of unknowns spread out before me, but my heart remained frozen. My inner curiosity and longing for knowledge, my deep respect for books, my yearning for the heart-pounding adventures contained within—all of those emotions had disappeared, snuffed out. Standing before my beloved tomes and feeling so hollow left me heartbroken beyond repair.

It was silly. It wasn’t as if our engagement was going to be annulled or I wouldn’t be able to stay at his side anymore. Still, I

realized the true reason why this had shocked me so much. It was the same reason rumors of the prince's harem were spreading—because Lady Mireille and Prince Christopher had such a well-known reputation together in the Miseral Dukedom. That was precisely why the queen had said, "Since we have a guest from the dukedom, it's the perfect occasion." Even Agnes had mentioned that while Viscountess Dauner had gone silent for a while, she was now suddenly crawling out of the woodwork with her daughter over talk of a harem. That was all because word had spread about Lady Mireille possibly becoming a concubine for the prince.

I was the only one who hadn't known about this.

No, that wasn't the real shock. It wasn't as though I believed everything Lady Sharon told me. I couldn't know if the prince really did intend to take concubines or not until I asked him directly.

The real reason I was hurting right now was because I was disappointed in myself for not seeing reality. When talk of the prince having a harem arose, I was more preoccupied with my personal failings. I didn't honestly think it was a real issue I was going to have to immediately face. This was probably because I took the prince's feelings for me for granted. I had grown conceited just because the two of us cared for one another, despite the fact that Prince Christopher still held a connection with Lady Mireille.

"A pest..."

Was I really interfering in their story? Was I the meddlesome party that kept the hero and heroine apart? What if I discovered I really was? What if Prince Christopher and Lady Mireille truly had loved each other since they were children, and I was merely getting in the way?

I squeezed my hands into fists and shook my head firmly. This was a bad habit of mine, worrying by myself and coming up with my own selfish conclusions. I needed to have a proper conversation with the prince.

But...what if he confirmed it was all true? What then?

"...Ngh."

My chest constricted so tightly I couldn't breathe. It was a struggle to suppress the pain. I was supposed to be the Bibliophile Princess but I looked positively miserable standing there in front of my beloved books. How utterly shameful to show myself in front of our great ancestors like this.

I want to be by his side, I thought.

Ever since I found out our feelings were mutual, my desire to be with him had driven me to be the best partner I could be. Yet in reality, I was just a book-obsessed fool that paid no heed to reality.

Maybe nothing really has changed after all.

I knew it was possible this could happen. At least, I *thought* I knew. But now that the actual threat was pressing in, I was too distraught to take proper action. Historically, I knew harems had been a consistent issue, but when I considered it might happen to me personally, hideous emotions started welling up.

With no idea of what to do, I silently stared at the spines of the books here, hoping they might offer me some answer. As I did, I suddenly thought of Queen Henrietta. What had she done when she was faced with this same dilemma?

I spun on my heel and started out of the library, intending to ask her as much, but froze when I realized something. What if she thought I didn't deserve to be at the prince's side because I couldn't handle this by myself? Once again, I was at a loss.

I tried to think of who I might rely on here at the palace, but it just made me yearn for my family—my father, my brother, or the servants who had helped raise me and knew me so well. Their faces flashed through my mind. I desperately wanted to return home, but it wasn't like I could abandon my official duties and do whatever I liked.

The fabric over my chest bunched as my hand closed in a fist around it. Seeing my brother would at least bring me some relief, so I decided to head in his direction. I wandered around the government offices, slipping by the offices of senior statesmen, but my brother was nowhere to be found.

He's the prime minister's assistant, and since His Majesty must be busy as well, maybe they're both working closely with the king? That thought occurred to me, but I couldn't trouble a bunch of people who were crunched for time simply because I was feeling lonely.

I drifted aimlessly through the palace before finally spotting my brother at the other end of a corridor. My steps were short and quick as I started toward him, but then I realized he was speaking with someone.

It was a woman with dark navy-colored hair—Lady Anna. Her eyes were the same deep shade, set wide with surprise as the two conversed. I watched her reaction with utter confusion as my brother's voice drifted into my ear.

"I'll say it one more time. Lady Anna Hayden, will you attend the Holy Night's Banquet with me as my partner?"

My eyes bulged in shock.

Lady Anna seemed similarly perplexed by the invitation as she murmured his name.

My brother's voice was always tender when he spoke to me, but right now it was strained with nervous tension as he continued, "I'm being sincere, Lady Anna. I have fallen for you. Please, won't you be my partner?"

She hesitated to respond.

I secretly slipped away before either of them could notice my presence. So much was happening here at once. My mind was a tangled mess even as it continued to race. Now there was an even bigger gaping hole inside my chest.

As the Holy Night's Banquet drew closer, people were hurriedly making preparations. I was the only one left alone, unsure of where I belonged anymore, sinking into a corner of darkness.

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"...That's why I'm telling you, don't ask for the impossible, Prince Chris. Humans have a limit for what they're capable of doing. I don't have ears as huge as the little circus elephant in Lady Elianna's book. This is a foreign affair, so it takes time to look into things."

"If you have time to flap your lips, then cooperate more with the Intelligence Department. Otherwise, what's the point of people calling you Sharp Ears?"

"Please don't drag that old nickname back from the grave. Right now I'm using my ears to listen to the goddess's music. I have plans to make for the Holy Night's Banquet as well, you know, so I'd appreciate it if you could overlook the fact that it's taking me a bit longer than usual with these tasks. They're taking me a bit longer than usual. Otherwise, I'll complain that you're overworking me."

"Excuse me? I'd like to see you try. The paperwork would come straight to me. I'll tear it up the moment it hits my desk."

"Yuck. Oppressive tyranny. Abuse of power. Illegal working conditions. Protect me, worker's rights! Down with unfair overtime! Down with autocracy! Prince Chris has donkey ears, just like the king from the legends!"

"...Don't get the wrong impression and think doing an impersonation of Eli is going to do you any favors, Alan." The prince's anger-infused voice trickled out of the room.

This scene was reminiscent of my previous visit. The chamberlain was halfway out the door when he noticed me in front of him. He turned back and tried to announce my arrival, only to watch quietly with exasperation in his eyes as the two exchanged words. I could also hear Lord Alexei's chilly voice and Lord Glen's resigned one.

After hurrying off to see the construction sight of the bridge in the Azul Region, the prince and his compatriots had quickly returned, looking none the worse for wear. In fact, the atmosphere between them was the same as ever.

The chamberlain excused himself, and I ducked inside the room. I knew I had to ask the prince my question before I got swept along by his excitement to see me, as had happened last time. I needed to ask

him if he planned on having any concubines, and if he was considering Lady Mireille as a candidate.

When His Highness noticed me standing by the door, his intense expression suddenly shifted, giving way to a broad smile. Before he could call my name as I was sure he was about to do, the words flew from my lips. “Your Highness, I would like to postpone our wedding.”

His face froze.

I slapped my hand over my mouth, stunned at what I’d just blurted out.

Instantly, the rest of the room went deathly silent, as if everyone had ceased breathing, suffocated by apprehension. Darkness seemed to descend on the room like a lunar eclipse. The air was so oppressive I couldn’t even sense any signs of life from the other people present.

Wide blue eyes pinned me with a stare. His taut lips started to move, but I couldn’t bear to hear what he had to say. I dipped my head and said, “I’m sorry!” Then I immediately fled from the room. My legs worked on their own, propelling me forward.

Chapter 5: Her True Feelings

After escaping from the prince's office, I avoided everyone's notice and took an external corridor to reach the snow-covered ground outside. Since preparations for the Holy Night's Banquet were underway in the inner gardens, several places had been cleared of snow as fir trees were hauled in. They must have had some design in mind, but regardless, I sought solace in the deep, deserted snow.

I had most likely wanted to run away for a while now, and those feelings had only grown stronger. Thinking back, I'd unconsciously done the same thing on the night of the evening party. Those feelings had manifested into words just moments prior when I spoke to the prince.

I had done my utmost until this point simply wanting to be at his side, but in reality I had weighed him down like useless baggage. I had grown flustered when presented with the issue of a possible harem. But I couldn't solve any of that by myself. Gradually, I began to lose confidence in staying with His Highness. I couldn't just throw my duties to the wayside, however, so I found myself drowning in my own emotions.

Until finally, I just snapped and ran.

What a pitiful Bibliophile Princess.

"...Ngh."

It was as Queen Henrietta had said. I wasn't prepared to stand beside the crown prince. Ever since I realized the prince and Lady Mireille had a connection, the budding doubt I pretended not to notice had just grown bigger until it was beyond my ability to manage. The seed had been planted when I heard talk of Lady Mireille possibly being accepted as a concubine.

My emotions seemed to barrel out of control when I couldn't handle them. Gone was the confidence I had cultivated from my shared feelings with the prince. While I might not believe that the prince was the kind of person who would ignore me in favor of building a harem, I found myself second-guessing when it came to Lady Mireille. My apprehension began to grow uncontrollably until I was filled with a detestable cluster of emotions.

It was the first time I had ever felt this before. A selfish rage—the complete opposite of love and yet just as powerful—consumed me. The emotion was pitch black, hanging over me like a thick cloud so I

could focus on nothing else.

To be honest...I was terrified of His Highness discovering how I felt. Maybe that was why I ran. I worried what he would think if he discovered this hideous side of me.

Just as my emotions began to well up, I felt a sudden tug on my hair. My feet froze as pain lanced through my head. When I glanced back, I realized there was a line of holly trees and my hair had caught on their branches.

I couldn't help resenting my hair for being so uncooperative. I knew it was my own paranoia, but it almost felt like even the tree was trying to contribute to my misery by clawing at me. Frustrated, I tried yanking myself free.

Ugh...!

I was nearly ready to scream out, "I'm so sick of all of this!" but the words hung in my throat.

I didn't want to relinquish the prince to someone else. I didn't want him to have an intimate connection with other women. I didn't want him to smile like that for anyone else. I didn't want him to use his sweet voice to call another woman's name. If he was going to touch other girls the way he had touched me, then I—

Right as my vision began to blur and emotion overcame me...
"Lady Elianna?"

I stiffened upon hearing that voice, and when I turned to look back, I found Lady Elen regarding me suspiciously. She must have been worried and followed after me.

"I saw you run out here in the snow, so I... Oh."

Lady Elen seemed to draw her own conclusions about the situation. "Don't move," she said as she drew close, reaching her hands out toward me. The lady knight was taller than me, so her arms were long as they encircled me. An unfamiliar scent drifted into my nose. Her fingers were gentle, working to untangle the strands of my hair from the tree branch. She gave the tufts a soft stroke as she checked them for any damage before peering down at me. A kind smile suddenly appeared on her face.

"An ornery branch, isn't it? Rotten thing, trying to hurt beautiful hair like yours." As if to console me, she pressed her lips to my hair. My heart drummed as I remembered when the prince did the same thing to me before.

There was something comforting in Lady Elen's eyes as she peered into mine. It felt as if she'd seen right through me and knew I was on the brink of tears. Feeling pitiful, I averted my gaze.

A chilly voice interrupted us. "Elianna."

I flinched. My whole body trembled as I lifted my gaze.

Prince Christopher had his usual composed smile on his face as he

hovered at the mouth of the short path leading over to us. It seemed he had followed after me as well, though his appearance gave no indication of it. He wasn't out of breath, nor did a single golden hair seem out of place. The only thing that was different was his eyes. The normally cloudless blue color now looked more like the frigid winter skies.

He's angry.

I understood it was only natural for him to be, and yet being on the receiving end of his anger made my heart sink. Without even thinking, I pulled a step back. Lady Elen quickly shot out an arm to protect me from being swallowed up in the tree branches again.

His Highness's eyebrow quirked as he watched. He reached his hand forward, and the atmosphere around him made it clear he wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. "Eli, let's talk this out properly. Come here."



“...”

Normally I would be happy to take his hand, but now I trembled just looking at him. This was a conversation he wouldn't want other people to hear, so I would likely be taken back to his office.

The office...? That office...? It suddenly felt harder to breathe.

When I'd seen that letter from Lady Mireille addressed to him in his office the other day, I caught myself, for the first time ever, wanting to peek at someone else's private correspondence. The feeling had come as a shock. I'd managed to peel myself away, but there was nothing more terrifying to me now than the thought of returning to the place where I'd experienced such a powerful emotion.

I instinctively shrank back another step. Lady Elen still had her arm held out protectively to shield me from the branches, so I naturally sank into her side.

The prince's brows rose to his hairline. "Eli," he said in a low voice, inching forward.

Lady Elen stepped out in front of me to block him. "Prince Christopher, perhaps you should cool your head a bit."

"This has nothing to do with you," he snapped. "Stand back."

"You're right, it has nothing to do with me. But I can't stand by while a woman cowers. This is your fiancée that you're cornering. What do you hope to accomplish by scaring her?"

He sounded annoyed as he exhaled. His voice was still low when he spoke, filled with barely suppressed emotions. "This is a problem between Eli and me. I'd appreciate it if you didn't butt in. Now come, Eli."

Though I was inwardly panicking, I remained frozen in place, still as a statue.

Lady Elen sighed before warning him, "Prince Christopher, if you talk to each other when you're still feeling emotional about things, no good will come of it. Lady Elianna seems to be very confused right now. Why don't you both give yourselves a little bit of time to calm down first?"

I could instantly tell he was irritated, so I darted out from behind Lady Elen and bowed my head to the prince directly. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness. Could I...have a little bit of time? I'd like to return home, just for today."

I couldn't help hating myself for trying to run away after he'd gone out of his way to chase after me. Still, everything Lady Elen said was correct. Even if I did face him right now, I wasn't confident I could convey my true feelings.

It was a sunny day out here in the garden, and yet the atmosphere in our little corner had grown icy cold. I kept my head bowed, unable

to look up at the prince.

After a short pause, he let out a sigh and quietly mumbled, “All right. Fine.”

A moment later, I heard the sound of him spinning around on his heel, and I lifted my face. The sight of his receding figure burned itself into my eyes—no amount of blinking would erase the image.

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Lady Elen accompanied me back to the servant antechamber where Jean was waiting for me. Soon after, Jean and I were in a carriage, bumping along down the road as we made our way back to the Bernstein estate.

Jean had already been chosen to continue serving me, and he would continue doing so even after I officially became the crown princess. As a result, he was now living in the palace as well. When I’d met him in the antechamber and informed him of my intent to return home, he’d looked absolutely horrified.

“Never pegged you as one of those dangerous beauties capable of bringing a kingdom to its knees, but looks can be deceiving, huh...” he mumbled to himself. I had no idea what he was referring to, but the next moment he had his hands clasped in prayer saying, “Please let me be wrong about this.”

Our house servants were surprised to see me abruptly return, but they were quick to console me without inquiring too deeply as to why I was here. For some reason, although I was the one who had asked for permission to return, I didn’t feel relieved to be back. My heart was inwardly berating me, demanding I return to the palace immediately and apologize to His Highness.

But I couldn’t do that. I felt like I didn’t know myself anymore. I was so determined to stay at the prince’s side, and yet, I ran from him. I wasn’t able to take his feelings into consideration even after he followed me out of his office; I was too wrapped up in my own emotions. I’d even abandoned my official duties to escape the palace.

I couldn’t believe what I had done. I’d lost sight of my own feelings. That night, I didn’t get a wink of sleep. And my heart was still in chaos when I got up the following morning and rode back to the palace.

I made my way to my private quarters immediately upon returning. Ordinarily, my day began with a court lady briefing me about my official duties for the day, including any correspondence I had received and any requests made to meet with me.

On the way there, I encountered a couple of my maids in the hallway. They gawked, puzzled to see me there. “Um, Lady Elianna, we heard you were in the archives and had ordered us to come see

you. Is there something you require?"

"Excuse me?" I blinked back at them. The three of us all exchanged confused looks.

The suspicion on my face must have been fairly transparent, because the girls muttered in their defense, "That's what Sarah told us..."

Doubt coiled in my stomach as I headed straight for my room. It should have been empty inside, but I could sense a couple of figures within. The maids accompanying me tried to leave to call for the guards, but I stopped them. I was sure we could handle the situation discreetly, given that the voices leaking out from the room belonged to women. I also had Jean with me. Granted, said manservant didn't exactly seem the most reliable. The disgruntled look on his face made it clear he loathed having to do anything beyond the bare necessities his job demanded of him.

The maids slipped out to wait in the adjoining antechamber while the voices from my room continued to trickle out. We could hear what sounded like two people quarreling.

"Please, enough of this, Lady Matilda."

"Stop your whining and start searching, quickly! You truly are worthless. The Holy Night's Banquet is the day after next. If I don't get this dress in time, I'll tell my grandfather and have you shipped out of the palace to go work on some farm in the countryside!"

"...The queen strictly controls where Lady Elianna's dress is kept. You can search this room as much as you like; I don't think you'll find it. Please, this is futile."

"Then find something else that will be useful to me! I need to steal her ideas and present them as my own before she gets a chance. If I don't stand out more than she does on the night of the banquet, Grandfather and Mother will both be on my case! Lady Sharon didn't have any useful information for me, and you've been utterly worthless as well. It's your fault I'm suffering like this!"

"Lady Matilda..."

The shrill voice belonged to Lady Matilda, it seemed. Sarah was attempting to quell the lady's outrage, but the latter continued to berate her.

"It was House Dauner that saved you, you know. You would never have been able to provide for your family without our aid. It was thanks to us that you got a position here in the palace as well. Filthy, cursed Azulan. If you understand how much we've done for you, then return the favor."

After hearing all of that, I made up my mind. Motioning for my maids to stay behind, I entered the room.

The two women jumped in surprise, spinning around to look at

me. Sarah went deathly pale as she mumbled my name. Lady Matilda, on the other hand, was flustered for only a moment before she regained her composure. “Well, well, if it isn’t Lady Elianna. I heard you had returned to your family’s estate, so I didn’t expect to see you here. Your lack of charisma makes it easy for people to overlook your presence. An unfortunate quality to possess, given you’re the prince’s betrothed.”

Her refusal to acknowledge that she had broken into my room without permission was almost impressive.

Lady Matilda seemed immune to shame as she continued, “Tell me, don’t you feel embarrassed to have neglected your duties at a time like this when there are so many foreign diplomats and dignitaries in the capital? Your behavior is precisely why everyone speaks so disparagingly about the prince. They talk about how faint-hearted he is, loathing any military action—how he goes weak at the sight of blood. All those in the military are seriously concerned about how well he’ll be able to handle it when our kingdom inevitably gets wrapped up in some war in the future.”

She clicked open her fan, smiling calmly and scornfully behind it. “However, if I were to be welcomed into the prince’s harem, all those in the military would feel much more at ease. That would reassure them that he’s not too weak to use the might of our kingdom should the situation call for it. It seems the two of us will be spending a lot more time together from now on, Lady Elianna.” The way she spoke made it seem as if she knew for a fact that she would become the prince’s concubine.

I mirrored her earlier blasé attitude, ignoring everything she’d said, and glided over to my desk. I reached for one of the drawers, withdrew a number of sample vials, and shoved them at her. When she regarded me suspiciously, I explained, “There are two rivers in Azul: the Mil River, which runs down from the northern mountain range, and the Tessen River. The Milulu Clam can only be found in a tributary where the two rivers cross. By processing those clams, we were able to recreate ink used by our ancestors. If this will be of some use to you, then please, take it.”

“Wha...” Lady Matilda’s haughty face flushed with color, her fingers tightening around the frame of her folding fan. “Are you trying to mock me? Why would I want this bizarre, ancient ink? Besides, you said it’s from a tributary in the Azul Region?” Lady Matilda’s eyes and voice held a note of disgust. She shrank away from the vial as if it were contaminated. “Don’t tell me you obtained this from Corba Village?”

“I did indeed. Is there an issue with that?”

“Oh my,” she gasped with an exaggerated look of surprise on her

face. “Lady Elianna, do you realize what you’re saying? Corba Village—and those clams you got from there—are utterly...” Although her words trailed off, her tone made it clear she was repulsed.

A hurt look flashed across Sarah’s face as she lowered her eyes. I stepped over to her, tucking her safely behind me. Reaching back, I grasped her hand in mine and kept my body facing Lady Matilda. “You seem to hold some biased views toward the Azul Region and Corba Village. Is that because some people say the Ashen Nightmare originated in the Azul Region?”

“Obviously. That land is cursed. They created that plague and sent the whole country into chaos. Grandfather said that was what caused Sauslind’s political power to decline. He also told me that if we’d been attacked by Maldura at the time, Sauslind would have been finished!” She huffed, face full of contempt. “Their suffering was divine punishment for their role in the outbreak. I see you’re trying to protect Sarah, but in case you didn’t know, she’s from Corba Village. She’s one of those disgusting, accursed survivors. Stay too close to her and she’ll infect you as well.”

“Those words could be construed as highly disrespectful toward the queen, given how she battled and overcame the plague,” I responded coolly.

She flinched slightly, but just as quickly, she scoffed at me. “Lady Elianna, there is no way for me to deny or excuse intruding into your room like this, so allow me to be blunt and fill you in. Who do you think has been leaking your information?”

Lady Matilda giggled behind the shadow of her fan. “Grandfather said it himself. Prince Christopher seems to favor you, but if the people discovered the person leaking your information was someone from the Azul Region, how would that reflect on the prince? Construction on that bridge of his might be suspended.”

Behind me, Sarah gasped in shock. “Lady Matilda...?”

I squeezed her hand even tighter. There was only one thing I could respond with. “Sarah isn’t the one responsible.” Lady Matilda opened her mouth to ridicule me for my naivety, but I cut her off. “The queen and I are already well aware that Sarah is from Corba Village in the Azul Region. She’s already explained to us what the conditions were like in her village back then. She was the one who assisted me in retrieving the Milulu Clams. If she *were* the one responsible for leaking my information to House Dauner, then you should have already known about the clams.”

“W-Well,” Lady Matilda stammered, “maybe she just didn’t tell us because she thought such information wouldn’t be pertinent...”

“Lady Matilda, your beliefs about Corba Village are mistaken.”

When she regarded me suspiciously, I began to recall the first time

I had ever felt enraged about something that didn't involve books.

It all started over fifteen years ago in the middle of winter, before the Ashen Nightmare came to be known by that name. There was an unusually high amount of rainfall that year. Downpours continued until the Tessen River began to flood and numerous bridges were swept away. A mountain range surrounded the Azul Region from behind, so they relied on bridges for trade and communication with the rest of the kingdom. With those gone, Azul was immediately isolated.

At the same time, the Ashen Nightmare finally began to unleash its full fury. It swept over the northeastern front, including Azul, and spread like a festering wound across the entire country in the blink of an eye. Everyone was so caught up in trying to deal with it that they spared only enough time to construct a makeshift bridge to temporarily tide Azul over.

Then the real tragedy struck.

Corba Village sat closest to the northern mountain range, right at its base where the tributary from the Mil River ran through. Even in a region as poor as Azul, their village was particularly impoverished. The soil there was unsuitable for farming, so after harvesting what they could from the mountains in the fall, the men would go off to other regions to work and send money home to their families, as was the custom there.

Since it was mid-winter by that point, the only people left in the village were relatively powerless—women, children, and the elderly. The only bridge leading out of the village had been washed away by the floods. They couldn't even send anyone to ask for help. Unexpectedly, they had to fend for themselves against the plague.

This incident was also known as the "Azul Tragedy."

Help didn't come until the end of winter. Everyone was skeptical; they didn't think anyone in the village could have survived. Yet the people there defied everyone's expectations. They'd relied upon each other and managed to keep the casualties to a minimum.

People were so surprised they proclaimed it a miracle at the time. However, as the Ashen Nightmare continued to ravage the land, unabated, people began to sing a very different tune. Suddenly, they were saying things like, "There are so many dead elsewhere, why was Corba Village spared?" They started to suspect that the people there had used some kind of sorcery to accomplish this. They started to wonder if the village was cursed—if maybe the village was responsible for the outbreak in the first place.

They were all baseless rumors, but unfortunately, humans have a habit of latching onto the most malicious of whispers. As the victim count rose and more people were affected, losing family members and

friends to the plague, perhaps they needed a scapegoat for all of their hatred. None of them had any regard for how those on the receiving end of this animosity felt.

“Lady Matilda, if the Ashen Nightmare’s outbreak had started in the capital, would you call the people here accursed and disgusting? How would you feel if you were among them, if you were one of the people being treated with such hostility?” I asked.

“Your hypotheticals are meaningless,” she spat back at me. “The outbreak *did* begin in the Azul Region, and you have no proof the survivors of Corba Village aren’t cursed.”

Sarah’s hand trembled as she tried to pull away from me, but I kept my grip firm. She had absolutely no reason to feel ashamed. “Corba Village was not the epicenter of the Ashen Nightmare outbreak. Some medical scholars even suggest that the disease resembled the plague that contributed to the fall of the Kai Arg Empire. Considering it spread from the northeastern front, such an argument is not without credible support.

“The Tragedy in Corba Village was a result of them relying purely on a bridge for trade and communication and was further complicated by their custom of men leaving to work for the winter. Sauslind and the lord of the region held part of the blame for not trying to improve conditions there earlier. Those in the village were victims. They are absolutely not disgusting nor do they deserve your contempt!”

“What...? Lady Elianna, do you truly mean that? You think the *kingdom* is responsible...?!”

She probably wanted to chastise me—someone of my status wasn’t supposed to admit to the nation’s wrongdoings. I didn’t falter, though.

“Prince Christopher is trying to build that bridge in the Azul Region right now in order to demonstrate that we won’t allow the same tragedy to strike again. We can’t. The country’s dignity is on the line with this policy, and it’s not something that can be overturned simply because of something I—a single person—have said.”

Not yet finished with her, I continued, “The people of this kingdom are precious. Without them, there would be no Sauslind and no king. I refuse to accept anyone as a potential concubine who fails to grasp something so basic and derides the very people she’s committed to protect!”

“How—” She gaped, blushing furiously as she reached her hand over to the nearby vials. “How dare a lowbrow like you speak so arrogantly!”

I flinched away in surprise. Behind me, Sarah slipped out of my grasp and flung herself forward. “Lady Matilda, please stop this!”

The two scuffled for a moment as Lady Matilda tried to fling the

ink vial at me, but almost immediately, I heard her shriek. In the midst of their struggle, the lid on one of the vials came loose, leaving a splatter of dark red across both of their clothing. The stain on Lady Matilda's expensive-looking dress looked particularly gruesome as the ink seeped in, the small crimson circles growing in size on the fabric.

"How could you...!" Lady Matilda cried.

"Excuse the intrusion," came a voice as someone entered through the open threshold, holding their hand up in a knocking gesture before peeking inside. "I tried to say something sooner, but I doubt you heard me over the fuss."

Suddenly, Lady Matilda rushed toward him, playing the part of a delicate noble lady. "Prince Christopher! Lady Elianna used that maid to ruin my dress!"

Jean restrained her just before she could reach the prince. She cried out in protest, but Jean wore his usual expression, looking both apathetic and exasperated that he had to deal with this. "Uh, let's see... I'm arrestin' you for attempted assault against Lady Elianna. And for defamation and false accusations against the crown prince... Think that about covers it, yep." He glanced at the prince as if searching for the latter's agreement.

Before His Highness could respond, Lady Matilda wailed, "Release me, you brute! I'll tell Grandfather about this! He'll have your head!"

"Huh..." Jean mumbled thoughtfully. "I might actually take that over servin' the demon lord."

"Jean..." Prince Christopher spoke in a low tone, chiding my manservant for his inappropriate joke. His Highness's presence was as commanding as ever, though his smile wasn't as radiant as it normally was. "Honestly," he huffed under his breath. The irritation in his voice was the same as yesterday. "This keeps happening, over and over. Do people genuinely think I can't discern a truth from a lie? Do I look that foolish?"

The room almost seemed to shake as a chill spread through the air, creeping over our skin. Matilda's rage momentarily subsided, and for some reason, Jean screwed up his face and averted his gaze. "So the demon lord has awoken..." he muttered, as if he'd seen something he wasn't supposed to.

"Lady Matilda Dauner. Your grandfather, Earl Dauner, is admittedly an important figure in the military, but he would be wise to act with a bit more caution when dealing with young people like me. Although, it is about time he vacated his seat in favor of the next generation. I would appreciate him stepping aside peacefully, lest he tarnish all the accolades and honors he's earned throughout the years."

Lady Matilda gawked at him, not comprehending the meaning of

what he was saying.

The smile he gave her was icy, very different from the dazzling ones he usually aimed in my direction. “The Dorud Company, which functions as a financial source for the Dauner family, is locked in competition with the Mers Company, which serves the royal family. I heard it’s common among merchants to send one of their subordinates in to infiltrate the ranks of the opposition...but they picked the wrong people to mess with.”

Overpowered by the prince’s intensity, Lady Matilda blanched. Her lips stilled as she trembled in place.

His Highness continued his onslaught in a quiet voice, still smiling. “There are many illicit rumors about the Dorud Company. Now seemed like as good of a time as any to squash them. But doing so would cause a number of issues, so I elected to change out their leadership instead. In time, the new head of the company will cut all support to House Dauner. I would appreciate it if Earl Dauner stepped down from his position *before* he loses all of his dignity in the eyes of the court.”

“No, that can’t be...” Lady Matilda mumbled in disbelief. “Without the Dorud Company’s finances, my house will...”

“Indeed.” Prince Christopher nodded. “The Dorud Company was shouldering all the debt your house owes, as well. If they cut you off... Well, it’s obvious what will happen then.”

Jean turned his face away as he muttered, “He really is underhanded...”

Fury shined in the prince’s vibrant blue eyes as he informed Lady Matilda, “The only people who proposed something as ridiculous as a harem in the first place were those from House Dauner. None of the other nobles in Sauslind have spoken up in support of it. That should have been enough for Earl Dauner to realize the futility of his suggestion, but it seems he’s grown senile, too. Regardless, the moment he messed with Elianna, I had no intention of showing him mercy.”

He pinned Lady Matilda with a callous smile, causing her to shiver. His commanding voice boomed around the room as he continued. “Elianna will be my *only* consort. There will be no other women beside me. None. And since I apparently ‘go weak at the sight of blood,’ maybe I should leave you in a cell overnight and let you see for yourself how faint-hearted I really am.”

She let out a muted cry.

His Highness coldly instructed Jean, “Take her away.” He didn’t even bother looking at her again after that. Once Lady Matilda was dealt with, he turned his gaze to Sarah. The latter was standing rigid and looking dazed. Prince Christopher narrowed his eyes and let out a

breath. "I must consult with my mother before deciding how we'll deal with you. For now, you may leave."

Finally, her body jerked to life. Sarah glanced over at me once, concern in her eyes, but she held to the prince's command, curtsying before she slipped out of the room with the other maids.

Soon, the door closed and it was just the two of us. His Highness took a step toward me, shortening the distance between us. "Eli..."

I instantly took a step back. My eyes were locked on his. I couldn't get the image of how he looked yesterday out of my mind, with his back turned, receding in the distance. Although I knew I needed to return to the palace and apologize to him, the reason I remained frozen in place was because that image was still seared into my eyes. I worried that maybe he was disgusted with me for being a coward, for being so obstinate.

Pain flashed across his eyes as he watched me slip back. I could feel my chest tighten painfully.

Words spilled past his lips. "I'm sorry, Eli."

I finally remembered to blink after staring at him for so long.

His face was pinched with pain, but there was honesty and sincerity in his voice as he spoke. "I was the one in the wrong... I'm sorry."

Why was he the one apologizing? The prince hadn't done anything wrong. I was the one who had worried in silence, bottled everything up, and driven myself to the edge. I was the one who couldn't trust His Highness's feelings for me and let jealousy hang heavy like a cloud over my heart. Even now, I was hurting someone I cared about.

I sucked in a sharp breath. My vision rippled, and in seconds, the prince's silhouette blurred in front of me. The sobs that crawled up from the back of my throat refused to stop, and all of the emotions I'd walled in burst forth as if a dam had broken. Finally, I realized the tears were pouring out, and I couldn't hold them in.

"...Eli." He muttered my name in surprise, making a few quick strides to close the gap between us. He wrapped his arms around me. The prince apologized to me again and tried numerous times to console me. I simply shook my head and clung to his chest. The only place I could truly relax was in his embrace.



I had no idea how much time had passed. After sobbing my heart out, the prince kept his arms around me and guided me over to a sofa. He comforted and consoled me, apologizing numerous times. I shook my head and started sharing all of my pent-up anxiety with him, stating each point one by one.

I told him how I didn't feel like I'd ever be like Queen Henrietta, but I'd been trying my best, only to have my private words misappropriated. I told him how I was now starting to feel hesitant, belatedly realizing just how terrifying the palace could be, and subsequently feeling lonely because of that. I told him how I felt anxious about the idea of him having a harem. That I'd seen the connection between him and Lady Mireille and grown paranoid as a result. How, when I'd heard how popular *Yule Lovers* was in Miseral, I'd only grown even more suspicious.

"But I did...feel like I needed...to ask you about it directly..."

Then I confessed how terrified I'd been to do just that, and that I felt like I couldn't add to his already busy schedule. In turn, I'd only backed myself into a corner. I revealed how wholly pathetic I had felt—how it had crushed my heart to think my own faux pas had interfered with his foreign policy.

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry, Eli. Really, all of this... The whole thing is my fault. You've done nothing wrong. Please, don't cry anymore."

"It's not your..." My voice trailed off.

He kept kissing away my tears before they could fall. He peppered my whole face with kisses, from the edges of my eyes, to my cheeks, to my forehead, and to the tip of my nose. He even stole away the tears that had landed on my lips, drawing the breath right out of me. I thought I felt a small moan slip out of my mouth when he did, but I was so focused on confessing everything that I didn't really notice.

We were still seated on the sofa, his arms draped around me. He showered me with warmth and kindness, his familiar scent enveloping me in a way that gradually soothed my aching heart.

"I drowned myself in my woes without trying to reach out," I lamented. "I should have asked you directly, Your Highness..."

"No. I really am the one in the wrong here. I know you are extremely serious and hardworking. I should have been there for you before you even started worrying yourself like that. I'm sorry, Eli."

For some reason, the two of us had spent the whole time just apologizing to one another. When I started sniffing, the prince took out a handkerchief and handed it to me, planting another kiss on my

forehead as he apologized sincerely for the umpteenth time.

“Everything with Lady Ramond is a misunderstanding,” he assured me. “Though, I should have spoken with you about her before you got the wrong idea. I knew you were struggling to acclimate yourself to palace life and your duties here, so I planned to handle it on my own. It pains me to admit, but according to Glen and Alex, this is a bad habit of mine. This was something involving the two of us. I should have spoken to you about it first. It was my fault for trying to solve everything by myself. You have nothing to feel bad about, Eli.”

“Your Highness...” I stared back at him.

His lips suddenly quirked, eyes softening. “Still, that’s the first time I’ve ever seen you cry like that. Knowing that you were sobbing because you were so concerned about me...ahh, not good. I almost want to see it happen again.”

I didn’t understand what he meant by that.

The prince looked happy somehow as he planted more kisses at the edges of my eyes, sweeping back my bangs to press his lips to my forehead, too. “I swore I wouldn’t do anything to make you cry until the day of our wedding. But, well, this isn’t half bad, either.”

Nope, now I really had no clue what he meant.

Still, why did the prince look so happy? I hadn’t wept like this since my mother passed away. At least, not as far as I could remember. So even I was surprised at how much I had cried in front of him.

He grinned at me, but there was something oddly irritating about it.

I realize this is completely inappropriate, but I kind of want to pinch both of his cheeks and stretch them. Would that qualify as disrespectful, I wonder?

Prince Christopher must have felt uneasy under the intensity of my gaze, because he recoiled and said, “Uh, Eli?” Then, suddenly, his eyes snapped toward the door. “Crap,” he hissed under his breath. “Eli, this way.” He hastily stood, dragging me up to my feet. Once I was up, he wrapped an arm around my back and ushered me into the connecting anteroom.

My maids and the imperial guards that had accompanied His Highness stood, surprised to see us. Before they could say anything, the prince lifted a hand to silence them. He instructed them to split up, open all of the doors in the room, and then wait in a separate room after they were done. His orders didn’t make any sense, but they still moved quickly to complete their task before slipping out. Instead of going through the wide-open door and joining them in the other room, His Highness sank behind a large curtain near one of the windows, hiding me along with him.

“Your Highness...?”

“Shh.” His finger pressed against my lips to hush me, and I could feel my heart rapidly speed up. His face was somber as he kept his attention focused on the corridor. The whole situation made my stomach twist in anticipation, but soon I discovered the cause for his behavior.

“Oh dear. What is all this? Did a thief enter Elianna’s room?” Queen Henrietta’s voice filtered in from the wide-open door.

My body jerked instantly in recognition, but as if to scold me for it, the prince dragged me even deeper behind the curtains. I could hear the sounds of one of the queen’s maids cleaning up the room as Agnes quietly relayed the situation to the queen.

“Ran away, hmm...” muttered the queen. She followed that up with an exasperated sigh. “House Dauner never learns, does it? When it happened to me, His Majesty could only admonish them for their impudence because the military’s might was too powerful for him to take further action. Now they’ve pushed my son into writing their obituary.”

There was an audible snap as she cracked her folding fan closed. When she next spoke, Queen Henrietta’s tone sounded more light and airy. “Well, not that such insignificant pests ever stood a chance against him in the first place. He’s been going head to head with Sauslind’s hidden tanuki since he was a child. More importantly, however...”

She smacked her fan against the palm of her hand, sounding somewhat irritated. “The Holy Night’s Banquet is the day after tomorrow, and we still haven’t decided on Elianna’s jewelry. Despite that, my son continues—*repeatedly*—to monopolize all of her time. He told me she would run from us if we interfered with her reading time, so I restrained myself from inviting her to events, only calling on her infrequently. Now she’s about to slip out of our grasp and it’s because of my own son’s incompetence. Honestly... Is he really even the king’s son? Utterly pathetic.”

My eyes opened wide in shock upon hearing her bite out such harsh words about the prince. His Highness’s graceful features were also twisted in a bitter expression.

After that, the queen spoke with Agnes about something for a few moments and then strode out through the door. Silence returned to the room, and after a moment, I could hear a small sigh.

“Unbelievable,” the prince huffed, seeming almost as irritable as the queen had been. “What’s wrong with me monopolizing your time? I *am* your fiancé, after all. I’ve been telling her for the past four years that you’re not her dress-up doll.”

I stared blankly back at him, and the prince let out a small breath.

“Eli, I’m sure you haven’t realized this yet, but for the past four years, my mother has adored you. Well, leaving the dress-up bit aside, anyway. Remember when we were first engaged and she kept persistently inviting you to all of her tea parties?”

He had already cut me off before I could deny that the queen favored me, so now I fixed him with a bewildered look as I tried to recall that time, nodding my head.

The prince smiled bitterly as he continued. “That was because she wanted so desperately to brag to everyone that you were her daughter-in-law. Especially after you cornered the other court ladies with your arguments, starting with Viscountess Dauner. You even casually drove away the other women who tried to approach me, though I’m sure you weren’t conscious of it. Watching all of that must have been exhilarating for my mother.”

I gawked at him in disbelief. “You’re saying *I* verbally cornered Viscountess Dauner?”

He nodded, an amused grin on his face. “I heard the story secondhand, but apparently my mother was hosting a tea party one time and the viscountess was in attendance. She began boasting about how she’d secured a supply line for some rare cosmetics and now had a monopoly on them, damaging my mother’s dignity in the process. You then told everyone that one of the ingredients used to create the red color in the makeup was scaled insects, dried and crushed. You explained the characteristics of these insects used in pigmentation, detailing how much time and effort went into creating that formula. Then you went on to talk about other insects used in cosmetics as well. That completely shut down Viscountess Dauner. As an obvious consequence, everyone refused to order any of her products, and for a while, the women in the palace refrained from using much makeup.”

Oh, goodness.

Hearing about what I had done in the past made me reflect on my lack of judgment, and I could feel myself pale.

Still, the prince continued on, seeming entertained. “You dealing a blow to that troublemaker was just one of the many reasons my mother took a liking to you, actually. Did you really think she wouldn’t be fond of you when she sees up close just how much you admire her and how hard you’re working to try to match her?”

My cheeks heated up. Was I really that transparent?

His Highness regarded me with a gentle expression, a smile tugging at his lips. “The reason she’s being so tough on you is because you’re just so adorable she can’t help it. She’s not very upfront about her feelings. Honestly, I don’t think you need to be like her. There’s nothing wrong with the way you are right now.”

I realized it was presumptuous of me to think this, but perhaps the

reason he thought that was because he was a bit biased?

My reflection looked so foreign in his eyes, so unconfident and lost. It took a moment for me to digest that it was really me I was looking at. His eyes softened as he watched me. “Hey, Eli, I said it before, didn’t I? Perfection may be demanded of us because of our elevated status, but we are only human. Humans have strengths and weaknesses. We must strive to embody that perfection at all times, but don’t let that blind you to how amazing you are already. You always understand what I’m thinking, and you put the people of this country first. You’re perfectly suited to stand at my side just the way you are right now.”

He kept his gentle gaze on me as he reached out to wipe away the trail of drying tears. “Also, while my mother may have had the impressive Miseral Dukedom to support her claim, you have the people of Sauslind—the people you have fought to protect with your very soul. Every other noble house understands that, with the exception of House Dauner. That’s why none of them have spoken out about a harem. If they did, they know it would earn them scorn and reproval from their own people.”

I gaped and blinked, not sure what to say.

His lips quirked again. “Eli... I don’t even have to try as hard as I do. Your presence alone protects and supports me. Each time you lose confidence in yourself, I’ll be happy to remind you of that. So don’t act so frightened.”

His fingers traced warmly over the dried tracks left behind by my tears. I could feel my eyes already starting to mist over again, as if my tear ducts were overproducing. At the same time, I realized something. As the wedding date approached and the reality that I was going to become the crown princess became gradually more apparent, fear had seized me. My cold feet came in spite of the fact that someone dear to me was reassuring me that I was fine just the way I was, regardless of the new responsibilities and duties I would be saddled with after our wedding.

Before I could cry again, the prince planted another kiss at the edge of each eye. “If you keep acting so cute, I won’t be able to stop myself, Eli.” His voice was thick with passion as he whispered to me.

My heart drummed loudly in my ears.

Come to think of it, Queen Henrietta had already left, so what were we still doing hiding behind the curtains? Suddenly, the blood in my heart was pumping even faster as I realized how secretive we were being, hiding away from prying eyes like this. Plus, the space here was cramped and we were pressed close to one another. I was certain he could hear my pulse.

I tried to shrink back, but the prince tightened his arms around

me to prevent my escape. "Honestly..." he started to whisper, his voice sounding so serious I wasn't sure if he was merely teasing me or not. "I was almost to the point of devising some way of dragging you off to my room. It's too bad. I really wish Mother would work on her timing a bit more."

Pardon? I blinked at him.

Beside me, the prince looked almost inconsolable as he exhaled. "Mother has a habit of rushing things, but I suppose Father isn't much different. The reason my administrative work has increased so much over the years must be because he's aiming for me to take over in the near future. My father wants to release my mother from her queenly duties as quickly as possible. I'm sure he plans to hand over the crown to me the moment you and I have an heir together."

"Oh..." I felt even more surprised now, my eyes widening. In spite of the fact that my brain seemed to ignore the mention of an heir, my cheeks still burned bright red.

At the same time, the prince regarded me with a kind yet mischievous look in his eyes. "Mother's worries are unfounded. Looking at our family lineages, the Bernstein House has been blessed with plenty of children each generation. If there are any problems with us having children, it will probably be from my side. But don't worry, Eli. It's my duty, and as a man, I will do my utmost. You have nothing to be concerned about."

Excuse me? I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you're talking about, I thought. Yet for some reason, I got the impression my purity was in danger. Was it just my imagination...?

His Highness soon had his usual smile back on his face, beaming as he leaned toward me. "Hey, Eli..." he said, freezing me in place as he always did when he used those words. "You kept saying you felt you should ask me something directly. What's your question?"

My heart squeezed as I recalled the doubt that had haunted me up until now. The first thought that weighed on me was: would the prince really welcome a harem? The second was: would the beautiful, wise, and popular Pearl Princess of the Miseral Dukedom, who had known the prince since childhood, be a better fit for him than a Bibliophile Princess like me?

My hand, which had been resting on the prince's chest, unexpectedly tightened around the fabric of his tunic. When my mouth opened, the words came straight from the bottom of my heart. "Please don't have any other women besides me." My tears seemed to have a mind of their own, falling unbidden.

His eyes went round. Instantly he covered his mouth with his hand and turned away. A groan slipped between his fingers. "Eli... That's against the rules."

Against what rules?

I regarded him quizzically, feeling unconfident about my decision to be vulnerable with him.

“Ahh, screw it!” The prince suddenly threw his arms around me. He buried his face in my hair, and his voice came out muffled. “...I wonder if I can really be patient enough to wait until spring...” I had no idea who that question was supposed to be directed at.

For some reason, he seemed dejected as he breathed a sigh down my back and pulled himself away. There was a conflicted, resigned expression on his face. He let out a small breath before pulling his lips up into a smile and wiping the remainder of my tears away. “Eli, you’re the only one. There’s no one else.”

His voice was so earnest it made my pulse come alive. When he called my name, I felt light headed from how much my heart sang. Seeing the affection in his eyes, which almost enveloped me as he looked at me, made all the doubt and anxiety coiling in my gut melt away like the snow in spring.

“No matter how many times you run away, I’ll come and find you. If my feelings for you were so easy to brush aside, I wouldn’t suffer the way I do. So, Eli, the one thing I ask is that you not doubt my feelings for you.”

Those words stole my breath away more than anything I’d heard before.

Sincerity shone bright in those vivid blue eyes—eyes that conveyed both the depths of his feelings as well as the hurt he’d felt. I finally realized just how cruel my actions had been. Once I doubted his relationship with Lady Mireille, I became so paranoid I couldn’t see anything else. But perhaps the person who was most hurt by all of this was the prince, after I refused to take his hand and insisted on keeping my distance.

I tried to put my feelings into words, but my voice never left my mouth. Apologizing didn’t feel right. Expressing my guilt over it seemed even worse. I was unsure of how I should communicate my feelings to him. So instead, with my heart still beating wildly in my chest, I straightened myself and rose to meet his lips, covering them with my own. It wasn’t as filled with passion as his kisses always were. It was clumsy and inadequate. Even I could recognize that. But right now, I wanted to do what my heart told me to.

I stared into the blue depths of his eyes, feeling like I might melt into them. I could feel the tears dripping down my cheeks. “I love you, Prince Chris. I swear, I’ll never run again.”

“Eli...” his voice was husky as his fingers wiped away the tears once more, face twisted in pain, eyes hooded with anguish. “I wish I could show you just how much I love you. How much I want to

protect you. And also, how much I want to mess you up in the worst ways possible. I want to show all of that to you.” His fingers pressed my mouth open. I could feel his breath close; his gaze was so inviting. My heart continued to thunder against my rib cage as I closed my eyes.

“Lady Elianna! I know you’re in there! Come out like a proper lady!” a voice interrupted.

The way Lady Sharon courageously demanded my presence reminded me of a scene I’d read in *The Travels of Parco Molo*. Though in doing so, she nearly made me jump out of my skin. My hands immediately shoved against the prince, sending him stumbling back.

...*Oops, I’m sorry, Your Highness.*

“This is definitely bad timing,” I heard Lord Alan comment.

“Can I just run away now?” Lord Glen asked with a tremor in his voice.

Lord Alexei scoffed. “The documents are piling up. Honestly, how many times do we have to go through this...”

“I apologize on behalf of my tomboyish lady,” said Lady Elen.

There were so many voices filling the hall outside my room.

The prince, who had stumbled out from behind the curtain, now had a hand on his forehead as he grumbled, “Every single time... These pests always come at the most inopportune moment...” There was hostility in his voice as he huffed, “Could this be the tanuki’s curse?”

I was too ashamed of what we’d been doing—trying desperately to cool the feverish heat burning across my face—to pay him much attention.

Chapter 6: The Piglet's Beloved Dimples

The usual faces were gathered in my private quarters in the palace. I was seated in the drawing room with Prince Christopher at my side. He had a smile plastered on his face, but it didn't reach his eyes.

There were three others present. They kept glued to the entryway, staying out of the prince's line of sight. One seemed amused at the situation. Another looked ready to flee. The last stood and watched indifferently.

Sitting across from us with a discouraged look on her face was Lady Sharon. Lady Elen was standing behind her, face strained with an apologetic smile. Apparently Lady Sharon was upset because the Holy Night's Banquet was fast approaching, and since she hadn't been able to get a hold of me, she was losing her patience. She'd finally used Lord Glen to force her way in here to speak with me.

In turn, the reluctant Lord Glen basically coerced Lord Alan and Lord Alexei to accompany him. He'd told them, "If I have to face the demon's wrath, you guys are going to be there with me. That's what true friendship is about." I had yet to decipher the meaning behind those cryptic words, however.

"Umm," I started to say, my head tilted as I struggled with how to begin this conversation.

Lady Sharon had requested that the two of us speak privately just as we had the other day, but Prince Christopher insisted on staying. He claimed, "I won't disrupt any more than is absolutely necessary. I am merely here as an onlooker." That only served to sour Lady Sharon's mood further. I found her petulant, bitter expression far more genuine and endearing than the usual fake mature smiles she wore.

Undaunted by the strained atmosphere, I asked, "Very well, Lady Sharon, to what do we owe the pleasure of this meeting?"

Her verdant green eyes suddenly narrowed, implacable. A hesitant silence stretched out between us, but she soon muttered, "All right then." Her voice filled with determination. "Lady Elianna, I want you to yield and allow me to go in your place with Prince Christopher to the banquet."

From the corner of my eye, I saw the prince flinch at her words, but he kept his silence as promised.

Lady Sharon's demands remained unchanged. She kept her tone even, despite the fact that the prince himself was present for our conversation. Even I admired her boldness. I had to wonder how such a young girl was capable of charging forward so fearlessly.

Lady Sharon's face glowed with confidence as she suddenly withdrew something from her bag. "You will be compensated, of course. If you agree to let me take your place, then I will loan this to you as a sign of my gratitude."

"This is..." I gasped, unable to finish the sentence. What Lady Sharon had deposited on the table was a single time-worn tome. There was no title on the front, but it was as thick as a dictionary. It appeared to be some kind of journal. A tremor ran through me; I could guess what this was already, knowing the house from which Lady Sharon hailed. "Don't tell me this is really..."

"It is," she assured me with a giant grin. "I figured you would recognize it immediately. And yes, it's precisely what you think. This logbook was kept by Ship Captain Vigo himself, a man whose navigational skills were unparalleled. He served the archduke before he was even known as the Sea King."

I swallowed hard. The Godwins were a distinguished military family with generations of men that had served as generals in the dukedom. There was one among them, however, who was known all across the continent: Lord Vigo Godwin. Lady Sharon was absolutely right in her claim, too; the reason the archduke became known as the Sea King was because Lord Vigo had managed to conquer the eastern trade route, something none before him had managed. This logbook was written by that very same legendary figure.

Unfortunately, on his way back to the dukedom, Lord Vigo contracted a fever while on foreign soil and passed away at a young age. For that reason, only his achievements and name were widely known. Who he was as a person, as well as the circumstances of his voyage were largely unknown. Though his life (and death) were recent history, the people of the dukedom worshiped him as if he were a heroic figure of legend. No doubt this was intentional on the dukedom's part; they probably wanted to conceal his trade secrets.

But this logbook—this was something he had written personally.
I want to read it.

I wondered just what kind of adventures were contained within? He must have recorded his hardships on the sea, his battles with the weather, the lands he visited, the strange flora and fauna, the foreign customs, foreign people, and foreign cultures. This one enormous book contained how he'd lived, how he'd felt. It had all of that, everything wrapped inside its pages.

I really want to read it.

Bewitched by the unknown world contained within, waiting for me to consume it, I outstretched my hands. I was too distracted to hear the conversation between Lady Sharon and Lady Elen.

“How could you bring that along with you?!” Lady Elen admonished. “You’ll be facing the general’s fury when you return home!”

“Don’t you dare interfere, Elen!” the young lady barked back haughtily. “Grandfather said it’s mine and I can do whatever I want with it.”

“I understand that, but you must realize he didn’t intend that quite so liberally. This could affect us politically *and* diplomatically!”

“The vice captain’s logbook is already circulating widely, so it’s a little late to worry about that! Besides, even my tutors said that other nations’ navigational skills are advancing daily and old knowledge like this will eventually become obsolete. What good will it do to lock it away until its value dwindles so far you can only get a copper for it? Wouldn’t it be better to leverage it while it can still be of use?” Lady Sharon reasoned.

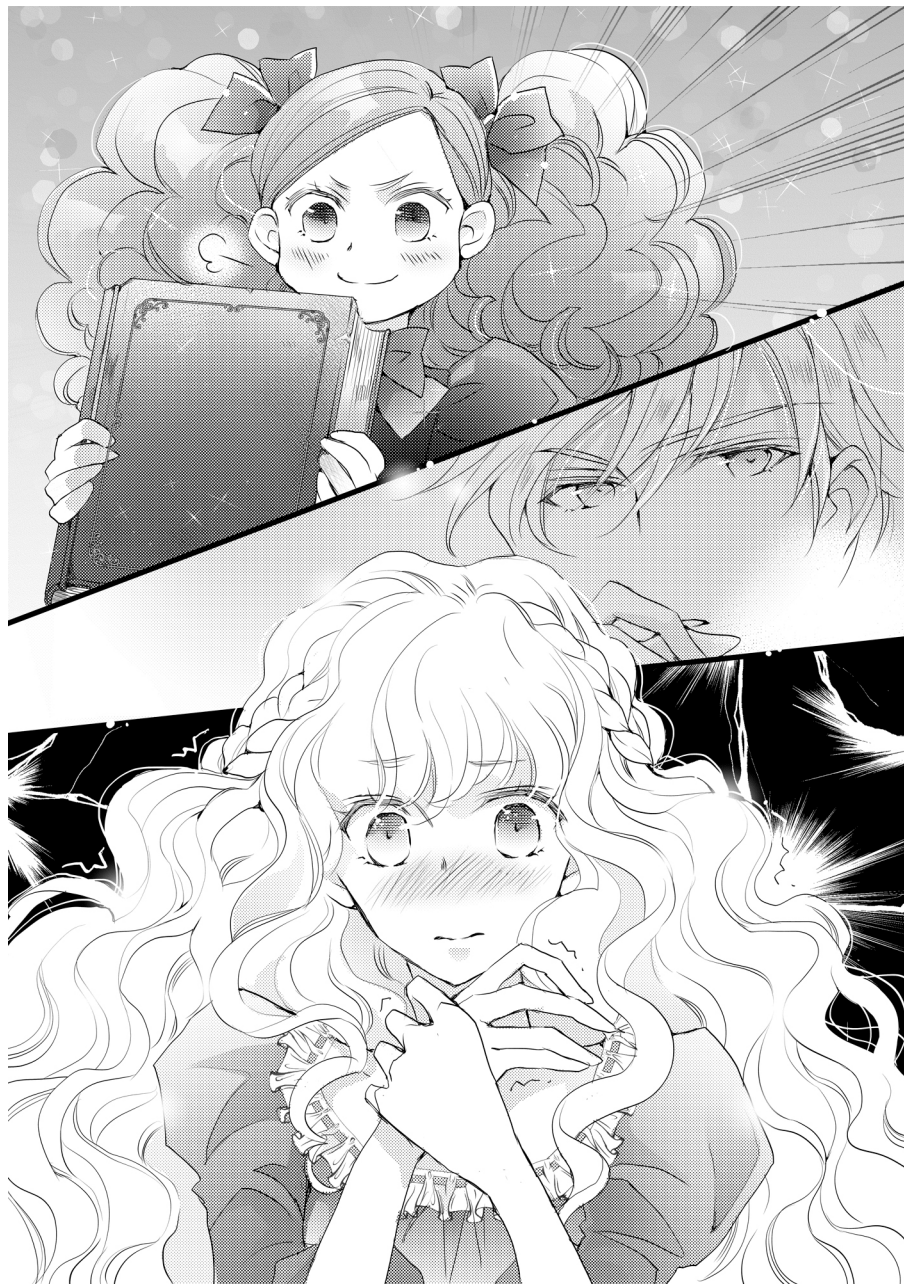
“Still—”

“Lady Elianna,” Lady Sharon interrupted as she grabbed the tome and cradled it to her chest. She seemed completely undeterred by her bodyguard’s protests as she called my name, drawing my attention back to her. “What will it be? I can’t actually *give* this to you, you understand, but I can loan it to you for the duration of my stay here in Sauslind.” She relinquished her grip on the book, slowly holding it out toward me.

My hands, which I’d folded back on my lap, twitched with the temptation again.

“I...”

I quickly snapped back to my senses. I could feel the prince’s gaze on me, strong enough to bore a hole right through me. Slowly, I returned my hands to my knees and tried to play it off, despite the cold sweat trickling down my forehead. The temperature in the room hadn’t changed in the slightest, and yet it suddenly felt unbearably warm.



I already knew there was only one way to answer her offer. I wouldn't even put the two on a scale to weigh the options. Yes, it was clearly which one I would pick.

"...I cannot accept that."

"I couldn't help but notice, Eli," the prince piped in, "how extraordinarily long that silence was, and how you now look like you're about to break into tears over your decision."

Nonsense, Your Highness, it's just your imagination.

Near the entrance to the room, I could hear hushed whispers being exchanged between the prince's inner circle.

"So that's what it looks like when someone loses all hope and comes crashing back to reality, huh?"

"For a minute there, she was almost glowing."

"Well, they do say, 'Eyes speak louder than words.'"

I assure you all, it's just your imagination.

Everyone around me expelled exasperated sighs as I gazed longingly at the tome before me.

Lady Sharon snatched the book away as she huffed, "You mean to tell me this isn't enough for you? Any well-educated man would be dying to get his hands on this, you know? This logbook was kept by Ship Captain Vigo *himself*, written in his penmanship! Oh, I see. You doubt its authenticity, do you? In that case, allow me to show you his signature!" She flipped a page open and tapped it. "Here, see?"

I couldn't stop myself from leaning even farther forward in my seat, stretching across the table. *Could you keep going? Turn to the next page, and then the next...*

"Eli." The prince's tone made it sound like a reprimand.

My body jerked, and I readjusted myself in my seat. *Yes, I know. The most pressing matter right now isn't the book.*

He exhaled again, slowly folding one long leg over the other. As he spoke, his voice was curt. "Lady Sharon, I suspect I know why it is you're so obsessed with me being your partner, but allow me to ask, are you doing this of your own volition? Or is this the will of the dukedom?" His tone was gentle. He sounded calm and composed, but Lady Sharon seemed to sense the iciness lurking beneath because she began to tremble.

"Well, I..." she hesitated.

Behind her, Lady Elen cut in. "Lady Sharon did this on her own. It is not the will of our country."

"Elen!" Lady Sharon gasped. There was a harsh look in her eyes which contrasted greatly with the refined look in Lady Elen's.

"Please consider your position," Lady Elen implored. "The blood of the former general runs through your veins. You may be a guest of

the Eisenach family, but you're not a private citizen. You *must* be more discreet with how you conduct yourself. Even Lady Mireille cautioned you about that."

"I know! But if I'm Prince Christopher's partner, then Lady Mireille will...!"

"Lady Mireille has never said anything about wanting this," Lady Elen interrupted.

Lady Sharon fell silent, seeming at a loss for words. After a moment, her temper got the best of her as she roared, "But, I mean...it's weird, isn't it! Lady Mireille had such a promising future ahead of her that people praised her as 'Miseral's Pearl Princess.' And yet as soon as talks of her engagement to Prince Christopher fell through, the archduke passed away. Then, that insufferable concubine and the duke family that had guardianship over her treated her so coldly.

"To make matters worse, she was married off to a man twenty-five years her senior, only for him to die shortly afterward. Immediately talks of her next marriage began, and...they're not very promising... Don't you find that strange?! Lady Mireille deserves happiness more than anyone else in the whole country!" In her rage, she slammed the logbook down against her knees.

I immediately chastised her for it. "You mustn't take your anger out on books!"

Her head jerked up, those verdant green eyes meeting mine.

I forced myself to remain calm, soothing my voice and steadying my breathing. "Lady Sharon, what you have in your hands right now is a logbook written by an outstanding captain—a record detailing his life, something he personally kept with him. You basically hold half of his life's work in your hands. You mustn't treat something so precious with such disdain."

After that rebuke, Lady Sharon's mouth trembled as she grumbled, "What's your problem..."

During the course of Lady Elen and Lady Sharon's quarrel, Prince Christopher had waved Lord Glen over to whisper something into his ear. After receiving his orders, Lord Glen quietly slipped out of the room.

Lady Sharon paid his absence no mind as she kept her eyes trained on me. "It's your fault for being here, Bibliophile Princess! Lady Mireille was supposed to be the prince's betrothed, not you. Besides, you don't care about anything but books, do you? So why don't you lock yourself in a library forever! Lady Mireille isn't like you. She's not so obsessed with books that she refuses to see anything else!"

His Highness and Lady Elen were poised to react to the young

lady's tantrum, but I faced her emotionally-charged accusations head on. "I can't do that."

I could tell just how deeply Lady Sharon cared for Lady Mireille, but I wasn't about to vacate my position on account of her feelings. In fact, now that I had hardened my resolve, I was even more disinclined to back down.

"You're right," I told her, "I *am* a Bibliophile Princess with no interest outside of books. However, my feelings for Prince Christopher are stronger than anyone else's. I absolutely refuse to hand him over."

As soon as I said that, I could hear the conflict in His Highness's voice as he mumbled, "I'm sure having a lot of highs and lows today..."

Lady Sharon grew increasingly indignant as she opened her mouth again, but Lady Elen cut her off with a sharp reprimand. "Lady Sharon! Do you intend to permanently damage the diplomatic ties between the dukedom and Sauslind over your own selfishness?"

"B-But—"

"We're past the point where you can resolve things by crying," Lady Elen told her gruffly. "Apologize to Lady Elianna."

Tears welled up in the little girl's eyes, spilling down her cheeks. She hiccuped as she tried to wipe them away with her tiny hands. Seeing her sobbing in response to Lady Elen demanding an apology made my heart ache. I knew I would have to accept whatever she said, even if it was insincere. Perhaps it was too naive of me to think we could disregard the whole thing just because we were in my room and not in the public eye.

Prince Christopher quietly cut in. "You have a point. Elianna and Lady Mireille are very different. Anyone who looks at the two of them would know that straight away."

My heart thudded loudly. I suddenly found it hard to breathe as I glanced over at His Highness.

Lady Sharon looked up, tears still falling from her eyes as she regarded him quizzically. For his part, the prince just smiled back at her. Then he turned toward me, his gaze filled with affection like it always was. "Eli, humor me. Four years ago when we first became engaged, you were intent on gathering all sorts of books on medicinal herbs from various countries. Why was that?"

"Huh?" I stammered at first, not expecting him to bring up something from so long ago. Back then, our engagement had made it infinitely easier for me to get my hands on rare tomes. As such, it was a calculated move on my part to—ahem, I digress.

"That was about the time you managed to obtain *The Travels of Parco Molo*, yes?" His Highness prompted.

I nodded emphatically. The terrifying glint in the prince's blue

eyes as he peered over at me was surely my exaggeration. *Surely.*

“Um, yes,” I started. “Originally, I sought that book because my cousin suffered from an internal medical imbalance, and up until that point none of the medicines we had in Sauslind had been effective in treating it. At the time, Sauslind was already teeming with new products and knowledge coming in from the eastern trade routes, and I figured we could glean even more from those foreign nations.”

I curled my hands into fists in my lap. There was another, crucial goal I’d had at the time. “I’d learned that research into treatments for the Ashen Nightmare had come to a standstill. I thought other books might provide us an alternate perspective. I’d hoped there might be some remedy overseas that wasn’t available yet here on the Ars Continent.”

Lady Sharon still had tears in her eyes as she stared at me curiously, blinking. The plague had spread before she’d even been born. The Miseral Dukedom had been fortunate enough to be spared many losses, sustaining even fewer casualties than Sauslind. Although the plague itself was embedded in history, Lady Sharon didn’t seem to understand why it was still garnering any attention in the present.

“But...” she spoke tentatively, “it’s already gone now, isn’t it? So it’s not like you need to...”

“It’s gone *for now*,” I corrected her. “We have no idea when it might resurface. When it does, it will be too late to lament not having searched for a treatment sooner. We still haven’t found anything to effectively combat it.” I kept from revealing my own chagrin by tightening my fists.

As if to alleviate my frustration, the prince continued, “Eli is the one who brought life back to the Herb Research Lab, which had previously grown stagnant. Though, that’s a story for a different time. The point is, Eli had already set her sights on the Azul Region before I even proposed constructing a bridge there. That was because of the Ashen Nightmare, wasn’t it, Eli?”

“Yes... Well, that was part of it, too, but...” I hesitated to explain; my emotions as a child had played a part in my interest as well. The air in the room made it clear they were waiting for me to continue, however, so I swallowed back my embarrassment and pressed on. “In a lot of the Azul Region’s fairy tales, the children have no parents. I wondered why that was, so I began to look into it. I discovered most parents had to leave their houses for extended periods to earn a living, just like Corba Village. It simply...struck me as very lonely for those families to have to live apart like that.”

It wasn’t all that rare in noble houses for children to be raised separate from their parents. Often nobles left their children behind in their regional territories to be reared by servants. Then when they

came of age, they would join their parents in the capital for their debut into high society. Even so, I was sure all children yearned to be with their parents.

Seeing other parents with their children had always made me feel lonely growing up, but then I reminded myself this wasn't commonplace in the rest of the kingdom. Ever since I learned what had triggered the tragedy in Corba Village, I felt even more determined to find something that could act as a financial foundation for them. That was why I focused so heavily on the Azul Region.

Of course, Lady Sharon seemed utterly baffled by my fixation as she countered, "But isn't that kind of...beyond your ability to fix? It's not like you can make sure every territory in the kingdom flourishes. Since the land itself is poor, there's nothing to be done about it, is there?"

"I don't think nobles like us should ever use the excuse that there's 'nothing we can do about it.'" I quietly scanned my own appearance—my well-groomed nails, my dainty fingers, and my high-quality clothing. Then I glanced over and surveyed Lady Sharon's impeccable appearance, not a single hair out of place. "We nobles never have to dig around in the dirt. We don't have to subject ourselves to the mercy of the rain and the wind. We have people to protect us and beautiful clothing to adorn ourselves with. Even the food we eat, which is so meticulously prepared for us, exists because of the support of the people. Due to poverty, many people have to leave their homes to work, and the jobs that await them are grueling and laborious. No one does that because they *want* to do it. We only enjoy the status that we do because of their sacrifices, so we cannot shirk responsibility for their financial difficulties."

"But...then, what should we do?" Lady Sharon asked. "There has to be a reason they're poor to begin with. If it were that easy to improve the quality of their lives, no one would struggle with this problem." Her emotional outrage had largely subsided. She was gazing calmly at me now.

I nodded in agreement. She was listening closely, digesting my words and responding with sincere questions. I liked how intelligent she was. "The people need something that will improve their quality of life and enrich their financial foundation. Allow me to give a concrete example. The border region of Edea has something called the Suiran weave. Currently, the area is bustling with weavers and merchants who have come to learn the skills required to create that weave. The earl had a new facility built for the express purpose of their education.

"Admittedly, this is just one example. As you said, Lady Sharon, it's not as if we'll be successful at every attempt we make. It isn't that

simple. There will, of course, be downsides. It's our duty as people standing at the top of this country to see that the land and its people flourish."

Lady Sharon listened quietly.

Once I was finished, Lord Alexei's calm voice intoned, "Pardon me for interrupting. I do understand what you're saying, Lady Elianna, but could you share why your attention was drawn to Corba Village's seashells specifically?"

"Oh, well..." My cheeks flushed. I'd made so many bold remarks, but actually, my interest in the clams had been pure curiosity at first. "You see... When I was helping create duplicate copies of some ancient manuscripts, I noticed the ink we use here in the Ars Continent differs from the ink sticks I read about in *The Travels of Parco Molo...*"

The prince wore a curious look on his face as he glanced over at me. I remembered that I'd once given him a stick of said ink and a pen I had imported from the east. Although, it might be more appropriate to call it a brush; they used these utensils in the east for calligraphy. It was so easy to write with that the pen's popularity soared amongst the nobles, but unfortunately, ordinary citizens could never afford something so high quality. The stick ink didn't work well on the cheap paper that was widely distributed around Sauslind, either. I was partially curious about the clams for that reason as well, but my main focus was what I saw on those ancient manuscripts.

I continued my explanation. "After several hundred years, even the writing on most other ancient manuscripts begins to fade with the passage of time. Through *The Travels of Parco Molo*, I learned there were writings from a thousand years ago using stick ink that were still well-preserved with the handwriting intact. My father was curious as well, so he obtained some ancient writings from the east, and we confirmed this was true. I began to wonder...what was so different between our ink and theirs? And why had some of Sauslind's ancient manuscripts faded over time while others hadn't? That began my journey in trying to recreate the ink we used."

"Using seashells...?" His Highness asked in amazement.

I nodded. "It's commonplace now to create ink using plants or animals, but in prehistoric times when people carved depictions of their daily lives and their religious beliefs on cave walls, they used a pigment created from seashells. I heard from my brother that even now, the color of those cave paintings is still vibrant. The ink used in our ancient manuscripts is the exact same type, and yet it fades over time.

"Part of the issue appears to be the quality of our paper. For the ones that didn't fade, it seems our ancestors actually traced some of

our ancient manuscripts by writing directly over the faded letters. As a result, you can follow their writing habits and preferences, which I find fascinating. There was one man who was particularly passionate about finding some way to combat hair loss. Another was extremely passionate about the unseen, such as the spiritual realm. There was yet another who had a penchant for sentences written in an indifferent and brusque manner, not unlike Lord Alexei. Their excitement is fairly evident in the way they traced over numerous ancient texts—oh!” I slapped a hand over my mouth the moment I realized I was derailing the discussion by gushing about handwriting analysis.

Lord Alexei still had a straight face as he stood at the door, but he’d stepped closer to it as if he were about ready to flee the room.

Prince Christopher stifled his laughter and tried to redirect the course of the conversation. “So that’s how your attention was drawn to the Milulu Clams?”

“Oh, uh...” I stammered, “yes. My brother told me that the pigment found in Milulu Clams was used in the Totti Cave paintings in Norn. However, when I tried to use it on paper, the color was so thin it wasn’t suited to writing letters. Applying several layers did seem to help, but...I still haven’t found a use for the ink outside of painting.”

It didn’t quite meet the standard necessary to be used as regular ink. I had eyed it originally in hopes it might become a local specialty, but as Lady Sharon said herself, things weren’t always that simple.

After a moment of contemplation, the prince said, “Perhaps there is yet a use for it.” Then he followed with, “Have you spoken about this to my mother?”

“Oh...yes.”

Queen Henrietta was also concerned about Corba Village and the Azul Region, so after I created my ink samples, I shared the results with Her Majesty.

His Highness had an amused look on his face. There seemed to be a deeper meaning behind his smile than I was privy to. “I am sure the ink you discovered will be revolutionary. The Holy Night’s Banquet will have a nice surprise in store for you. That said... Lady Sharon, do you understand now?” He suddenly turned the conversation back toward her.

Her tears had dried as she quietly followed the conversation, and now she was staring blankly back at Prince Christopher’s dazzling smile.

His Highness had a bewitching air about him as he explained, “Four years ago, Eli pushed forward the research into the treatment of the Ashen Nightmare. She also sought a way to enrich a land beset by poverty. She had many other achievements as well, of course, but even without being recognized as my betrothed, I am sure she would

have found another way to accomplish the same things. That's precisely why the people of Sauslind support her. All biases aside, the differences between Elianna and Lady Mireille are as clear as night and day."

I do believe you are laying on the praise a bit thick, Your Highness.

"All right, but..." Lady Sharon still seemed unconvinced as she countered, "why has the *Yule Lovers* story, which is based on you and Lady Mireille, gained so much popularity in Miseral then? They do say, 'where there's smoke, there's a fire.' I understand that Lady Elianna is more than just a Bibliophile Princess now. But is it not also true that you and Lady Mireille had feelings for one another when you were younger? Isn't that why this story came into being?"

She did seem to have a point. Now it was my turn to quietly pin the prince with a stare.

"Eli," he said with a pained sigh.

At some point, Lord Glen had made it back, and he approached the prince to hand him something. Prince Christopher then laid it out on the table.

A letter, I realized.

Before His Highness could open his mouth to speak, Lady Sharon was already clapping her hands together in delight. "Oh my goodness! This is Lady Mireille's handwriting. So the two of you *have* been corresponding with each other in secret. I mean, it's no surprise, *Yule Lovers* is based on the two of you!"

Maybe I should leave...

"Eli! Why are you trying to get out of your chair?" His Highness reprimanded me. "I swear to you this isn't what you're thinking!"

Over by the door, Lord Alan and Lord Glen were whispering amongst themselves.

"He looks like a husband that just confirmed his wife's suspicions that he's been cheating on her."

"Yeah, that's pretty solid evidence right there."

Prince Christopher glared daggers their way. "Glen, it sounds like you want to live in Miseral for the rest of your life, hm? Very well. I'll make sure to fill out the proper paperwork. Just you wait."

"Why only me?!" Lord Glen shrieked.

My room was suddenly filled with a lively cacophony as Lord Glen protested and Lady Sharon squealed over the fact that Lady Mireille and Prince Christopher were exchanging letters.

Both Lady Elen and I sighed in unison. She shot a gentle smile my way. When I returned hers with one of my own, the prince interrupted. He seemed irate as he cleared his throat, trying to quiet everyone. "At any rate, Lady Sharon, about this story that's gaining popularity in the dukedom...I suspect there's a motive behind it."

“A motive?” Lady Sharon blinked back at him in surprise as if he’d completely caught her off guard.

His Highness nodded, sounding a bit scathing as he replied, “Don’t you find it odd? For a story that seems like it would be beloved by women, it has an awfully advantageous angle for the dukedom. Plus, you said it yourself, didn’t you? After the previous archduke passed away, Lady Mireille was treated coldly by those with power—the concubine and the duke family. Lady Mireille was the youngest daughter of the previous archduke. He doted on her the most, and she was so beloved by the people they dubbed her the ‘Pearl Princess.’ I heard that this same duke family was involved in a shipwreck that hurt the dukedom politically. Right now, that family is trying desperately to cover the damages and salvage their reputation.”

“What does that...” Lady Sharon’s voice trailed off. She was about to ask what that had to do with anything, but immediately the realization dawned on her.

The prince continued in a flat tone. “And speaking of things that would benefit the dukedom politically... It wouldn’t be strange at all if they wanted to take advantage of Lady Mireille’s popularity for their own gain.”

So that’s what this was about, I realized.

They treated her coldly, arranged a marriage for her, and now they stood to gain even more if they were able to ship her off to Prince Christopher as a concubine. Considering her former popularity with the people of the dukedom and the fact that she was childhood friends with His Highness, she still had a lot of value in their eyes.

Unfortunately for them, I was his betrothed, and our wedding date had already been formally announced. Since Lady Mireille had already been married once before, she didn’t stand a very promising chance of being selected as the prince’s concubine. Thus, they came up with the *Yule Lovers* tale to boost her reputation in hopes Sauslind wouldn’t be able to ignore her. At least, that was my assumption.

The look in the prince’s eyes made his opinion clear; anyone who supported Lady Mireille becoming a concubine was only helping that duke family make use of her as a tool.

Lady Sharon turned deathly pale. She trembled as she voiced the horrific thought that crossed her mind. “I-I don’t want to believe it, but...could Earl Ramond...have been murdered?”

True, if that really was the duke family’s aim, Lady Mireille would have to be a widow for them to use her as the prince suggested.

My brows knitted together in thought.

As for the prince, his tone remained just as matter-of-fact as ever. “Who’s to say?” It sounded as if he wasn’t particularly interested in the answer. “I haven’t looked into it deeply enough to know for

certain, and it's just one possible inference. I don't have any proof to back my claim. However, one cannot rule it out completely."

"Oh no..." Lady Sharon looked aghast, her shoulders slumping as her gaze fell to the table. Almost as quickly, the spark returned to her eyes. "Then Lady Mireille must have sought you for help, right? That must be what this letter is about!"

"Unfortunately..." The prince withdrew the letter from the envelope and unfolded it, leaving it exactly the way I had seen it before when it sat atop the table in his office. "The letter wasn't quite so endearing. Just as I was putting out feelers within the dukedom, Lady Mireille was also doing an investigation of her own and noticed my movements. The content of her correspondence outlines a deal where the both of us will share the information we collect. She also insists my interference is unnecessary because it's a domestic issue, and she and her people can solve it themselves. Quite bold of her."

After receiving the prince's permission, Lady Sharon eagerly snatched up the letter to read for herself.

The prince grinned and cheekily added, "Oh, and she also says you're like an adorable little sister to her, but you might cause trouble while you're here. She asks that we not pay your wild ideas any mind. Finally, she closes by saying she's truly happy for me, being able to marry my first love."

Lady Sharon wordlessly sank back in her chair, having lost the purpose she'd held onto this entire time. Her eyes were again filling with tears when Lady Elen let out a muted sigh. "Please allow me, Elen Wenham, to apologize on my lady's behalf."

She gave a polite bow before hesitantly continuing, "I realize this is no excuse...but the Godwin family is a military family. I'm related to them as well, so I can tell you that the women in her family don't have much power. Lady Sharon's mother has a very weak constitution, so Lady Mireille has looked after her since she was a child. She lacks the necessary discretion of someone in her position as a result. Regardless, I hope you will find it in your hearts to overlook her mistakes."

Her words had the emotional appeal of a lady and the gallantry of a knight. Lady Elen seemed to be saying that Lady Sharon thought of Lady Mireille almost like a mother.

His Highness still had a sharp, scathing air about him, but I had some different words to offer Lady Sharon. "This is just like *The Piglet's Beloved Dimples*."

After a moment of silence, everyone's eyes turned to me in confusion. "What?"

I recalled everything that had transpired up until now and began to share a story with them. It was a fable from the Azul Region.

Long, long ago, there was an orphaned piglet named Lu, who grew up hearing everyone else tell him about how great his parents had been.

They'd say, "Your father was an amazing pig."

"Your mother was so stunning. Compared to that, you're so scrawny you don't even look edible. I'm sure you won't sell for more than a few copper coins. Feeding you just costs us extra money. You'll be punished eventually for it!" they told him.

Even after hearing all that, Lu still didn't leave the little house he'd grown up in, partly because the little girl who raised him was so kind. The poor thing was just like Lu; she didn't have any parents either.

She told him, "You're my only friend in the world, Lu. Let's stay together forever and ever!"

Both of them were terribly lonely.

Then, one day, the girl returned to the village full of excitement. She said, "Lu, Lu! You have to hear this. I'm in love! I'm in love with the liege lord's son. He's so nice and so amazing." And then she wistfully wondered, "Ohh, isn't there something I could do to catch his eye?"

When the little piglet heard her say that, he started thinking. He wanted to do something to help her. Suddenly, an idea hit him. If he became the village's number one pig and looked irresistibly delicious, the liege lord would have to notice.

I'm sure I can do this, he thought. After all, I had an amazing dad and a stunning mother.

And so, the little piglet began training in order to become the village's number one pig, all because he wanted to see the joy on the little girl's face—to see the dimples on her cheeks when she smiled.

"Oh, I know that story. It's been made into a children's song too," Lord Alan interjected. He waved his index finger through the air in line with the rhythm as he sang, "Oh, my adorable piglet, Lu. Your father was great, your mother was stunning. Surely, someday your time will be coming. Eat, eat, eat your fill. You will be a delicious pig too. Stay with me forever, my adorable piglet, Lu. The lyrics continue for three stanzas."

"So what happened to the piglet?" Lord Glen asked curiously.

Lord Alexei sighed. "He's a pig. No doubt the story ends with him getting eaten. Fables always have some kind of lesson in them. He worked hard for the little girl, but it backfired in the end—probably something along those lines. At any rate, the story *does* fit what happened here."

“Alex, you’ve got no heart,” argued Lord Alan. “Clearly this story was about the piglet and the little girl’s character growth. It’s adorable how hard little Lu worked for the girl’s sake.”

“Anyway, what really did happen to him?” Lord Glen asked again.

While the rest of their group began bickering about the fate of the piglet, His Highness gave an exasperated sigh; he was used to these antics. “The point is, this problem was born out of the piglet’s—excuse me, Lady Sharon’s—misunderstanding about Lady Mireille’s feelings. Her letter clearly shows how deeply she loved her deceased husband. Just because you care about someone doesn’t mean everything you do for them will have a positive impact. I can sympathize with him for that. For the piglet’s sake, let’s forget this ever happened.”

Relieved, Lady Elen conveyed her gratitude and bowed once more. Then she lifted the dumbfounded Lady Sharon into her arms and started toward the door. She gave one more formal farewell before she slipped out of the room. Only after the door was shut did Lady Sharon seem to return to her senses. We could hear her shrieking from the hall, “Who are you calling a piglet?!”

I blinked in surprise, unsure how my story had led us to this point. At the same time, I felt a deep sorrow for the tome that Lady Sharon had carried away with her.

Beside me, the prince seemed entirely spent. He breathed a sigh, sweeping back his blond hair. His voice was heavy with fatigue as he mumbled, “That was a pigsty of a situation.”

Chapter 7: The Holy Night's Banquet

On one block of Sauslind's capital, Saoura, lights were flickering on.

The skies had been sunny and clear since early that morning, and standing in the palace, you could see the entire town—from the district full of nobles' manors, to the merchant district, to the residential district. You could even see the nearest town hovering in the distance. Above it all, the sky was painted in a faded rose color as day turned to night. Rows of houses were gradually beginning to light up as darkness fell.

The Neville River cut across Saoura from the west to the southeast. The houses that lined its banks had ample stacks of firewood to supply them. Orange flickers from their own lights reflected off the surface of the nearby water. The whole capital glittered, as if the fires dotting it were jewels embedded in a band of darkness. This was one of the most famous sights of the Holy Night's Banquet, something we called "Daybreak's River," for its resemblance to dawn's light.

The plaza in front of the palace had been cleared in preparation for the event, and in spite of it being the middle of winter, crowds had gathered, buzzing with enthusiasm. Escorted by Prince Christopher, I stepped out onto the balcony that jutted out into the plaza. Cheers instantly erupted from the crowd, so overwhelming that the very sky seemed to shake from the clamor. I flinched at first, my mind going blank.

Each Holy Night's Banquet began with the royal family appearing in front of the public. Per our country's custom, the royal family would then celebrate the tranquility of the previous year while praying the one to come would be just as peaceful.

Since this was my first year participating, I was nervous. My whole body froze so solid it felt as if someone had placed me in an ice box and left me there for a thousand years. Up until now, I had only acted as the prince's partner once the sun had set and the evening party began, but now that our wedding date had been announced, things had changed. I understood that, but I still couldn't shake my anxiety about stepping out on a stage in front of so many people.

I had spoken with the general of the imperial guard, Earl Eisenach, a few moments prior, and his words had only served to

heighten my apprehension. The man had the Eisenach's trademark red hair, though his was cropped short. He also had a shockingly jovial attitude for someone in such an influential position.

When we were standing by in the waiting room before coming out on the balcony, he had spoken warmly to me, not an ounce of ill will to be seen on his face. "Can hardly believe it. There are more people showing up than usual since they know you'll be making your appearance this year, Lady Elianna. I got a report from the capital's patrol unit that we even have people surging in from the nearby towns. Those of us on security detail will have to keep a watchful eye." He gave me a big, excited grin without a hint of malice, looking genuinely amused as he ensured our safety.

Beside me, the prince mumbled, "So it seems Glen's habit of saying things that don't need to be said is something he got from his father."

My anxiety just seemed to build until all of the blood had drained from my face. I wasn't exactly in the right state of mind to respond to his comment.

The prince noticed and used the secret spell he had taught me before to try to soothe my nerves. "You're my treasure."

As I stood frozen on the balcony, reflecting on the events of a few moments prior, two hands suddenly clamped over mine, bringing me out of my daze. I lifted my head to look at His Highness.

His blue eyes gazed at me softly, a smile on his face as his lips moved to the shape of my name. I couldn't actually hear his voice over the sound of the crowd outside, but it was enough to calm me down.

"These people are your allies. Besides, I'll be right beside you the entire time, and I'm your number one supporter," he said.

Those eyes of his and the spell he'd cast were enough to alleviate my fears. I found myself smiling in spite of my anxiety, and the crowd's excitement swelled. I continued to beam as the two of us waved at the cheering people. When Prince Theodore stepped out to join us, they cried out happily.

Finally, Queen Henrietta and His Majesty made their appearance, and the people's elation hit a crescendo so loud my ears were buzzing. The current ruler of Sauslind was King William Christen Ashelard. He was still handsome and healthy at 47 years old. What he lacked in grace, he more than made up for with ambition that boiled just below the surface. He had such a commanding air about him that people naturally bowed their heads in his presence.

The king and queen smiled at their adoring subjects, waving their hands in greeting. The clamor resounded for a while as the crowd

rejoiced in the presence of the entire royal family. His Majesty continued to wave at them as they cried out in support, but eventually his eyes turned to the rest of us before sweeping over the crowd. There was strength in his gaze, and as the people felt the weight of it, they gradually hushed. Their voices were replaced by an excited tension.

Sensing that their anticipation was at its zenith, the king raised a hand. In conjunction, all of the lights in the palace instantly lit up. Moments before, the palace looked like a hulking shadow in the background, but now as it flickered to life, it transformed into something extravagant and majestic.

I could only stare in amazement while the crowd below erupted in applause, whooping.

The Holy Night's Banquet had begun.

Sauslind was a polytheistic country. The main god we revered was the great Dora. According to legend, Dora gathered all the other gods together to celebrate the end of the year with a banquet that lasted the entire night. That was how the Holy Night's Banquet began.

This was the one day of the year when the capital didn't sleep. The whole city would be lit up until dawn. Despite it being mid-winter, people were bustling through the streets. Merchants had gathered from across the continent to set up a marketplace. Actors and street performers put on skits mimicking the gods at banquet.

In addition, the royal family had set up a free mulled wine stand for the people. Tipsy adults lined up, lured in by the sweet smell of liquor while children pleaded with their parents for a taste. When their mothers and fathers brushed their requests aside, the children would pout, anxiously awaiting the day when they became adults and could sample alcohol as well.

The festival's hype would continue well throughout the night. Today was a celebration of family, so most homes were brimming with raucous merrymaking.

The capital patrol stood watch from the shadows to ensure the safety of all during the Holy Night's Banquet. Their numbers were bolstered specifically for the holidays. They worked tirelessly, intervening in any conflicts, ensuring no drunks fell asleep and died of hypothermia on the roadside, and keeping an eye out on all corners of the capital as people trickled in from across the continent.

People were essentially split up into two groups: those who were living up the night's festivities and those who hid in the shadows, keeping the peace. It was thanks to both that Sauslind's Holy Night's Banquet was counted as one of the most famous celebrations on the Ars Continent.

Cheers continued to reverberate behind us as we made our way back inside.

I breathed a sigh of relief now that I'd fulfilled my duty. Prince Christopher gave a small smile as he opened his mouth to try to express his appreciation, but another voice cut him off.

"Elianna, there's no time. Come now." Queen Henrietta ushered me along, not even giving me time to share a few short words with the prince before her maids and ladies-in-waiting surrounded me. They hastily pulled me from the room.

Actually, this breakneck pace had been ongoing since this morning.

I'd hardly had time to breathe today, let alone open a book. Before the sun had even finished its ascent that morning, maids were already hard at work scrubbing my body. I then attended a festival at the royal temple where the Hero King was celebrated as a deity. After that, I dined with a foreign delegation, engaged in small talk, and entertained guests. It was dizzying, as if several days' worth of my official duties had been squeezed together into a single day. My suffering only continued as I was whisked off to change for the umpteenth time today.

Once we were safely within Queen Henrietta's quarters, the maids began peeling off my current garments. They were elegant, florid, and specifically made to protect against the cold. After those were off, the maids adorned me with a simple dress, and I took a few precious moments to catch my breath.

For the upper class, the most important festivity of the night was just moments away—an evening party we called the "Holy Night's Banquet." Day turned to night early during the winter, and that was part of the reason for Queen Henrietta's sense of urgency.

It was rare for us to dine during these evening parties. Thus, Her Majesty and I were having a quick, light meal. As I absently watched a maid pour my tea, I noticed her form was unusually clumsy for a maid working in the palace. Curious, I lifted my gaze to examine her, only to squeak in surprise the second I saw her face. "Lilia?!"

She grinned, hazel eyes regarding me mischievously as if to say, "Got you!"

Lilia Storrev was my cousin and the youngest daughter of Earl Storrev.

I opened my mouth to ask her why she was even here, but I was so utterly confused at seeing her in a maid outfit that my lips couldn't even form the words.

Lilia contorted her features into a mute expression, speaking politely as she addressed me. "It's been almost two months since I

came to the palace and began learning. I have no doubt there is much I still need to improve upon, so I hope you will be patient with me, Lady Elianna.”

I blinked back at her. “Um...pardon?”

She nearly burst into laughter at my reaction, but Agnes was pinning her with an intense gaze, so Lilia kept her lips tightly thinned into a line. The queen’s head lady-in-waiting turned to seek approval from Her Majesty before telling Lilia, “We have a few moments. Explain to Lady Elianna.”

Lilia turned her gaze toward me again, shooting me a meaningful look as she gave a short curtsy. Her tone was less formal this time around. “Basically, after everything that happened at the Hunting Festival, the prince gave me a direct invitation. He told me to become your maid and work here at the palace.”

“Oh my...” I gasped.

“He said he didn’t mind if it was temporary, just until you acclimated to your life at the palace after becoming crown princess. You always take everything so seriously and push yourself past your limits. He thought you would need someone you could feel at ease with.”

I couldn’t argue the point. Just a few days ago, I felt lost and wanted someone to whom I could speak without questioning their motives or loyalty. Still, when I considered Lilia’s age, I felt hesitant to agree to this.

“You still have so much potential,” I said. “You’re unmarried and from a high status family. You don’t have to go out of your way just for me.”

The people who served the royal family were all people from reputable backgrounds. Her Majesty’s most trusted retainer, Agnes, was originally from an earldom herself. However, Agnes’s husband had passed, and she was a widow when she was accepted to work as Queen Henrietta’s lady-in-waiting. Lilia was still much too young to be bound to me when she had such a promising future ahead of her.

To my surprise, Lilia seemed entirely unconcerned as she grinned back at me. “The Storrev house has already secured its future by producing an heir; my eldest sister, Claire, already took a husband and gave birth. The next eldest, Julia, is engaged to the son of a viscount family. Both of them have already found their path. As for me, I’m more like Lady Anna. I would rather be a working woman than spend my time searching for a man. Prince Christopher’s invitation was perfect for me.”

“Oh...” I continued to stare blankly at her.

I never knew she had such aspirations.

Lilia informed me that she already had her family’s blessing and

support in this. As she continued, still looking as impish as ever, she said, "I can't be of any use to you in high society; you already have my mother, sisters, and Lady Therese to watch out for you. So, I figured I could be of service to you from a different angle. Besides..." Those clever eyes gleamed with amusement. "Being with you is far more interesting than looking for a partner, taking part in evening parties, or joining ladies for tea every day."

...Her outlook on life was eerily similar to someone else I knew.

If she had an objective of her own and saw purpose in what she was doing, there was nothing for me to debate with her about. I was about to tell Lilia as much, but Her Majesty's head maid suddenly cleared her throat.

Lilia jumped, straightening her back. "I hope that was an acceptable explanation." She was speaking formally with me again. "I am still in the midst of my training as a maid, but I hope to serve you well henceforth, Lady Elianna." She gave another polite curtsy. Despite the fact that she was close family, the head maid was ensuring Lilia knew the importance of using proper etiquette in public when interacting with me.

I still felt a bit worried about her, but it was true that having my younger cousin with me did lighten my mood.

It seems I still have much growing to do if I ever hope to be self-reliant, I thought.

Queen Henrietta expelled a quiet sigh. "That boy truly is too soft on you."

I straightened my posture and turned back toward the table.

Her Majesty returned her teacup to its saucer, her tone clipped as ever as she said, "I would like to discuss Sarah with you."

The mention of Sarah nearly made me jump with surprise. My face tightened with anxiety as I replied, "Very well."

Part of me did want to defend Sarah for being compelled to do things against her will, but regardless of the circumstances, she *did* enter my quarters with Lady Matilda without permission. If I tried to dodge official procedure and laws on account of my own personal feelings, it would have a negative impact on all who worked here at the palace. I understood that.

Her Majesty let out a quiet exhale before saying, "I oversee the inner palace and thus, any transgressions by any maids there are my responsibility. Additionally, I am in charge of background examinations on all merchants who enter the inner palace. The slip there is also my fault, so I owe you an apology for all of this."

"No, there's no need to—"

I immediately tried to jump in, but Her Majesty cut me off, seeming unusually emotional. "No. I would rather be transparent and

confess my mistakes. Otherwise, my own child will come at me with those passive-aggressive jabs of his. I don't need him pointing out my shortcomings or further limiting my ability to intervene. Honestly, that boy... Of all things he could take away from battling those old tanuki, did it have to be how to fight underhandedly?"

I'm not sure I understand...?

I tilted my head at her.

Emotion continued to smolder inside of Her Majesty as she sighed. Gracefully, she swept up her cup and drew it to her nose so she could inhale the soothing scent of her tea. Seeing her like this reminded me of the prince. After another sharp exhale, she continued. "Sarah will be removed from her position and demoted. She will return to the lowest position possible and work as a servant. If she so desires it, however, she may still be able to regain her position as a maid."

The fact that Sarah wasn't being driven out of the palace entirely prompted me to sigh with relief. She would have found it incredibly difficult to earn employment anywhere else if she'd been fired by the royal family.

"You will have another loyal follower you can count on when she returns to her position as a maid," said the queen.

My eyes shot wide open in confusion. "Um...?"

"The reason her punishment was reduced to a mere demotion was because she so regretted what she had done and was fully prepared for her termination," Her Majesty informed me. "She said she'd betrayed your trust in her."

While I puzzled over how best to respond, the queen drew a breath. "Elianna, there isn't a single person who has served in the palace for the past four years that doesn't understand who you are as a person. There are a staggering amount of people waiting anxiously for you to take your position as crown princess. You draw in supporters well enough on your own, even without Chris's needless meddling. Have more confidence in yourself."

I stiffened at her strong encouragement. "Yes, I understand." As I stared back at her, my heart filled with warmth. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

The queen cleared her throat and continued in the same tone of voice, "One more thing about this incident. You had someone at the palace that you could have consulted *before* you ran home. I have experienced the very issue you were stressing over. Why didn't you come to me for advice? I have told you numerous times now that you will be my daughter."

"Oh, um...yes, I know," I blurted back, though inwardly I felt a bit confused.

Was Queen Henrietta scolding me for not conferring with her? But

back then—

Before I could reflect too deeply on my thought process at the time, Her Majesty chided me. “You are incredibly intelligent, but that same intelligence is the reason you overthink things all the time. You need to learn to be more honest with yourself and rely on other people.”

“Yes, of course...”

Rely on just who, exactly...?

Lilia and the other maids giggled as the queen’s cheeks lit up. However, she ignored her embarrassment in favor of continuing her curt address. “Your dress for this year was dyed using pigment from the Milulu Clams you found. I had my personal designer put it together, using our conversations as a basis, and the fabric is made from the newest material in the Tor Region. Whether the Azul Region and Corba Village will benefit financially from this depends entirely on how well you market this for them. Be sure to do your utmost.”

“Huh...?” I froze in place.

Queen Henrietta’s expression was unreadable as she announced, “I can occasionally lend my hand in bringing your ideas to fruition, as well. It can’t be all House Storrev and Chris getting the credit.”

I remained stiff as we finished our meal, and then Her Majesty and I were urged to separate rooms to begin our cumbersome preparations. As always, I felt my stamina and energy being zapped right out of me.

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As the maids made small adjustments to my gown, I stared vacantly at my reflection in the mirror.

The dress Queen Henrietta secretly had designed for me was a magnificent one indeed. The newly developed fabric from the Tor Region was light and breathable, giving it a transparent finish that allowed the color of my skin to show through. I had thought the material more fit for summer, but Her Majesty’s designer had layered it numerous times to make it appropriate for the season.

The pigments used to dye the fabric were drawn from the Milulu Clam. Its hues had been so light when applied to parchment, but when used on the fabric from the Tor Region, it came out a pink rose color. The dyed material layered together around my hips to create a deep crimson tone. The designer had made a bold move in leaving the fabric thin around the shoulders. It exposed the paleness of my skin which filtered pink under the light layers of the sleeves.

The hems were adorned with silver and gold thread, making the whole outfit sparkle with each movement, as if fragments of light were spilling out from the folds of my dress. Thanks to how

lightweight the fabric was, it would flutter as I danced, resembling flower petals drifting through the air.

It was almost as if each sheet of fabric had been carefully layered together like the petals of a rose. The whole thing was gorgeous. Not just that, its gradation made it different from any other red dress I had seen before. Each row of fabric was dyed a light rose pink, and when they overlapped, the color looked even more lustrous. There was a hidden mystique about the dress that took my breath away. It was sure to draw people's attention.

Ordinarily, a palette such as this would suit some personalities better than others, but the way this dress was designed, with such elegance and purity, anyone could wear it and look stunning.

I was shocked the pigment of the Milulu Clam had a viable future as clothing dye. I admired the queen even more for her ability to innovate.

Although, I would have been more impressed if I weren't the one wearing this dress.

"Oh..."

To match the deep colors of my dress, the maids had applied more makeup than they usually did. My unruly mane had also been groomed into such a complex arrangement that I couldn't even believe it was my own hair I was looking at. Even the loose flyaways had been smoothed back, indicating just how determined the maids had been about polishing me to perfection. The Elianna reflected back at me wasn't the Bibliophile Princess I was accustomed to.

I was in such a daze that I didn't even realize someone had entered the room until they were right behind me. "Eli..."

The moment I heard him call my name, I glanced over my shoulder. The prince looked like the midnight sky. His attire was such a dark indigo it was nearly black, adorned by gold and silver embroidery that gave it an elegant flair appropriate for an evening party. His glamorous apparel only served to amplify his intimidatingly charismatic presence, making him outshine everyone else.

His golden hair dazzled in the light, and his blue eyes shone bright like a cloudless sky. His features were handsome, and his body was toned in a way that was perfectly balanced without being ostentatious. He truly was the pride of Sauslind Kingdom—the brilliant and highly anticipated heir to the throne, Prince Christopher.

"Your Highness..."

I had seen him so many times before, and yet still I was captivated by his appearance. It wasn't until I saw his eyes go wide with shock that I returned to my senses.

Up until this point, I had never worn anything red. My aunt and cousins had never recommended the color before, likely avoiding it

because they knew it wouldn't suit me. One of my other epithets was the "Library Ghost," after all. Red would undoubtedly make my spectral appearance look even more haunting. Then the prince would have new ghost stories surrounding him about the "Woman in the Red."

Oh no, no, no, I panicked inwardly.

His Highness heaved a sigh. "I see... So this is what you look like when you wear red." In a whisper he added, "I didn't think she had it in her, but Mother surpassed my expectations this time."

I desperately wanted to escape from the prince's scrutiny, but the maids making final adjustments on my gown gave me pause. Their concerted efforts acted as a silent coercion that rooted my feet firmly in place. By the time I worked up the nerve to speak, I was nearly in tears. "Please just be honest with me, Your Highness."

"Pardon?"

"Does it not sting your eyes to look at me? The dress is...utterly gorgeous beyond words, but I am fully aware it doesn't suit me at all."

Even though they had been devoting their attention entirely to my dress, the moment the maids heard me say that, they all looked up at once. They seemed to be glaring at me in disbelief. One of them opened her mouth to contest my claim, but the prince's chuckling silenced her.

"Knowing you, I'm sure you must really mean that when you say it," the prince said with amusement. His eyes swept back over me again. "You really want me to give you my unbiased opinion?"

I summoned my courage and nodded. "Yes."

The maids seemed to read the mood and stepped back as soon as they were finished with the last of their alterations. I seemed to be the only one who didn't notice the change in the prince's gaze as his expression softened.

He smiled at me as he delivered his impressions, but the words were so contrary to what I expected that he may as well have been speaking a foreign language. "At a glance, you remind me of a rose. I will admit the dress is a masterpiece of design on its own, but you are no less stunning with it adorning you. It's only as breath-taking as it is because you're the one wearing it, Eli.

"It resembles a single flower beginning to bloom—a rose bud repelling the drops of morning dew as it stands there, innocent and dignified, just beyond my reach. A bud that promises a fragrant scent within, threatening to bloom when you least expect it. A very memorable impression, indeed."

I could feel my cheeks quickly heating up.

There was sincerity in his blue eyes, but something mischievous lurked within. "I already knew you were adorable, but wearing this

dress, you look like a temptress. It's almost terrifying how dramatically a lady's appearance can change with a little bit of makeup. I wouldn't mind being strung along by a she-devil as long as it's you."

"Y-Your Highness..."

"Oh, but I *do* worry about you attracting other men's attention," he remarked. "The dress does expose your shoulders and skin a bit too much. And if you bend down, it could be...dangerous. I'll be your only dance partner for tonight, all right, Eli?"

Excuse me?

The intensity in his eyes seemed to be gradually drawing this conversation in an entirely different direction. "Normally, you would be wearing my sapphire at an event like this, but it wouldn't match your red dress. Is this my mother's scheming? She can use those tactics if she likes because I have a card up my sleeve as well. There's another mark I can place on you that everyone will be sure to recognize."

Something dangerous flashed across his face. Concerned, I began to back away, but another voice cut through the room.

"Prince Christopher," Agnes barked in a cutting reprimand. Her Majesty had left Agnes in charge of directing preparations for my gown and makeup. "Perhaps you could explain to me why you are in a lady's changing room? Are you incapable of exercising even a modicum of patience?" The intimidating nature of her tone was exactly what you might expect from a lady-in-waiting who had served the queen for so many years. She scolded the prince with such practiced words it was clear she'd done this since he was a child.

His Highness's handsome features contorted in displeasure. Apparently he had waited for Agnes to slip away to attend to something else so he could infiltrate the room. He sighed, looking like a child who refused to back down even after he'd been censured for his mischief. "I haven't had any alone time at all with Eli today. You could show some kindness and allow me a few moments."

His voice turned sweet as he returned his gaze to me. "I reserve the right to be the first one to see you dressed up so beautifully. And truly, Eli, I can say this with confidence: when the new year begins, this dress of yours, dyed with the pigment of Milulu clams, will become a hit with the nobles."

"I'm not so certain..."

He stepped closer, smoothly wrapping his arm around my waist. There was something intoxicating and teasing in the way his blue eyes studied me. "At the same time, I suddenly feel less inclined to let other people enjoy the view. Maybe I should lock you up and keep you all to myself."

“Y-Your Highness, that’s not...” I stammered.

His gentle fingers caressed my cheek, and his eyes crinkled at the edges as he smiled. When he spoke, his words were full of passion. “This dress looks absolutely perfect on you.”

My cheeks were turning the same rosy red as my dress. A flame ignited inside my chest, and the warmth from it spread throughout my body, turning into a confidence that welled up within me. I felt so happy I naturally smiled back at him, and he grinned even wider. His kind eyes drew even closer until...

Someone cleared their throat. Undaunted, Agnes chided him once more. “Your Highness, did you not hear me? Exercise some patience.”

While I fidgeted with embarrassment, belatedly remembering we had an audience, the prince clicked his tongue in dismay at being interrupted.

Chapter 8: Promises Made in Winter

I could already sense the crowds filling the dance hall in the palace. Soft music was playing, beckoning people in. Waiters maneuvered themselves gracefully through the maze of bodies, silverware clinking as they went. In the midst of all this clamor came the occasional trickle of foreign words, no doubt from foreign dignitaries and diplomats socializing amongst themselves.

Prince Christopher and I made our way into a nearby anteroom. We were greeted by the astonished gasps of His Majesty and Prince Theodore. I shrank back in embarrassment, but Queen Henrietta, who had already entered the room before us, immediately lifted herself and strolled over to scrutinize my appearance.

“...The red shading may be a bit too strong. The depth of color with the layering does have a sense of beauty to it, but there are still improvements that could be made. I think the skirt volume could stand a little reduction as well. The design seems a bit...archaic for my tastes,” she muttered to herself with a serious expression. Apparently Her Majesty had her own very specific preferences when it came to clothing.

Beside her, the prince gave a troubled smile. “Mother, did Lady Matilda stealing Eli’s idea bother you that much?”

The queen’s auburn eyes smoldered with anger as she lifted her head. “Need you even ask? They had no compunction about stealing her ideas and marketing them as their own. It would be one thing if they’d genuinely come up with it themselves, but it’s something else entirely to appropriate another’s ingenuity for your own popularity.”

She refrained from speaking any further, but her tone was filled with a level of disgust I rarely heard from her. Still seething, she continued to mumble, “To make matters worse, it wasn’t just anyone’s wisdom they were ripping off, it was Elianna’s—and they had the gall to do so in front of everyone at the party. If you’ve ever wondered what utter lack of shame looks like, you need look no further than the viscountess and her spawn.”

Her Majesty followed up those curt words by turning her admonishing gaze toward me for some reason. “Elianna, you hold some blame here too. This was your idea they stole, and yet you just sat there twiddling your thumbs over it. Did you see how hideous their outfits were? Even the goddess would spurn them out of shame.”

Still indignant, she gave a shaky exhale, slapping her closed fan against the palm of her other hand. "I had no choice but to acknowledge them simply because it was originally your idea. You show such determination and boldness when defending others, but you must learn to use that for yourself as well. Those who do not value themselves cannot possibly hope to protect anyone else."

I instinctively responded, "Yes." My heart warmed as I gazed back at her and said again, "Yes, I understand." Her Majesty was as infuriated as if she'd been the one personally affronted. The only reason she was scolding me was because she cared.

Before, I'd thought the palace a terrifying place, but now I realized I'd been blind to all of the support around me. There were so many reliable people I could turn to.

Emotion welled up inside my chest, a deep affection for someone who only existed in my memories. It was an affection I decided to share with the person in front of me instead. "Thank you for everything, Mother."

Queen Henrietta's expression instantly froze. Those narrowed eyes of hers snapped wide open.

I recoiled in surprise. I didn't think I had said anything to offend her, but perhaps...?

Her Majesty made an indiscernible but decidedly unladylike sound as she thrust her fan open. She covered the majority of her face with it and averted her eyes. "I was reprimanding you for your behavior. What lady in her right mind would thank someone for that?"

"Right," I agreed, shrinking back.

His Highness turned his back toward me, trying to stifle his snickering, which earned him a reproachful look from his mother. She barked at him, "This would have never happened if you'd taken proper care of your political opponent in the first place. By dressing Elianna up so brilliantly, we'll squash all talk of Norn. You can thank *me* for that."

His brow quirked. "Why, thank you for bringing that up, Mother. I was already equipped to deal with the military faction if needed. In fact, I already prepared a hot new topic that will attract people's attention and draw it away from Norn as well. Let's be honest, you were merely using this as an excuse to engage in your hobby of dressing Eli up."

"Such a disrespectful child. Just because I'm the one who drew out Elianna's charm doesn't mean you need to be so jealous. It's unbecoming," she sneered. "If you're that bitter, why not simply admit the truth?"

"Excuse me? Why would I be bitter over *you* and your silly hobby? They say you can't judge a book by its cover and that seems to be

doubly true for you.”

The queen huffed. “Oh? And what, pray tell, are you trying to imply?”

“The dresses you choose for her are always horribly garish. Only someone who enjoys girlish dress up games would pick out such gaudy outfits,” His Highness accused.

“You have some nerve,” she scoffed as the two launched into verbal warfare. Tensions heated, and no one even tried to stop them. “It suits Elianna perfectly. Why quibble as long as she looks beautiful in what she wears?”

I was being dragged into this conversation for some reason, but I couldn’t follow along. My brain was wracked with confusion as I shrank away from the two. Prince Theodore, who was stretched out on one of the sofas, beckoned me over with his hand. I hesitated, but I eventually slunk away from the battlefield to join Prince Theodore and His Majesty, curtsying before them.

The king’s iron blue eyes softened as he smiled. In contrast, Prince Theodore’s ultramarine eyes danced with mischief. They each complimented me on my dress.

I couldn’t help feeling nervous; this was the first time I had ever worn a red dress like this, and I was going to be presenting it at the Holy Night’s Banquet—the largest evening party of the year. Fortunately, the prince’s words had inspired some confidence in me, and with the entire royal family praising the dress, I was starting to finally feel up to the challenge.

After I returned their compliments with a smile and some words of gratitude, His Majesty leaned forward expectantly. “Elianna, now that you have started to call Ettie ‘mother,’ what will you be calling me?”

“Um...well since you’re the king, ‘Your Majesty’?”

His face fell in devastation.

Prince Theodore grinned over at me in amusement. “Eli, when you introduce me to other people, you can just call me your refined, gentle, and charismatic uncle.”

Uh...?

“What utter nonsense are you spewing?” the prince snapped at him. “She can introduce you as her lonely uncle that will probably die before he ever finds himself a match.” His Highness looped an arm around my waist, pulling me away from Prince Theodore and over to sit with him on the opposing sofa.

Queen Henrietta settled herself down straight across from me and shot the king a cold look from behind her fan. “Chris and I have spent four whole years making progress with her. Why don’t you try to invest the same amount of time before you start with your absurd

expectations?”

His noble brows sank in disappointment. “That seems an awfully steep mountain to climb just for her to change the way she addresses me.”

Meanwhile, Prince Christopher and Prince Theodore traded jabs with one another as they usually did.

“Well, Chris, if I do die in the throes of solitude, it will no doubt be by *your* hand. This is already a busy time of year, and then you had to come to me with some top secret plan you wanted me to oversee. I felt sorry for all those in the Pharmacy Lab. They were working like possessed madmen to finish in time.”

“But they did finish in time, which is excellent,” said the prince. “This will breathe life into the Azul Region. Surely they understood the great purpose in their labor.”

Prince Theodore sighed in exasperation. “You know, you could benefit from talking to a holy man. He might have some harsh words for you, but perhaps you could beg him to teach you the meaning of ‘compassion.’”

“I’m wounded, Uncle, truly. Compassion is exactly what I was showing you. You’re a deadbeat, and I was still kind enough to send some work your way so that you might demonstrate your worth to us.”

“Compassion indeed,” Prince Theodore drawled with amusement. “In that case, I should get my reward for all that hard work from Eli.”

“What?!” His Highness snapped. “What nonsense are you spewing? Aren’t you a bit young to be going senile already?”

“Come now, it’s nothing to throw a fit over. I’ll just tag along with you both for that trip you were scheming. Interfering in your time together will serve as good entertainment for me. Besides, I’m the only one Eli can truly discuss books with, anyway.”

“How would you like to be kicked in the face by a horse, Uncle?” The prince’s threat was so menacing it crept through the air with ill intent like a toxic cloud.

In contrast, Prince Theodore seemed just as jovial and carefree as ever.

I was also able to enjoy listening in on His Majesty and Queen Henrietta, who were conversing as they only did amongst their private circle. It warmed my heart to be included, and I was reminded once again that the royal family was welcoming me in with open arms.

Suddenly, I remembered my father and brother. Once the new year started, this would be the norm for me. My home was here at the palace now, rather than the house I had been born and raised in. I couldn’t help but feel anxious about all of the people I was leaving behind—my father, my brother, and our household servants. At the

same time, if Lady Anna would do us the honor of marrying into our family, it would be a great relief to me. It was a selfish thing to hope for. I had no idea how she actually felt about my brother. Still, however far off that future might be, I was sure it would be perfect if things turned out that way.

His Majesty interrupted my thoughts by saying, “Elianna, I heard how tirelessly you worked for the people of the Azul Region. I would like to commend you for your achievements, of course, but if there’s anything I might grant you as a reward for all you’ve done...please, enlighten me.”

“I couldn’t dream of it.” I hurriedly shook my head, firmly refusing him. I still wasn’t sure that I had actually accomplished anything, despite my best intentions.

All I had done was use the seashells to make pigment, but it was the queen who then utilized that to dye my dress. I did believe the color that came from the Milulu Clams could eventually be valuable, but trends like that always faded eventually. Besides, dyeing was a well-renowned specialty craft in the Tor Region already. Even if the Azul Region did produce a stunning dye, in the long run, it was still a far cry from what was necessary to guarantee them financial stability in their daily lives.

When I tried to claim it didn’t even work as a basic solution to the current issues, Prince Christopher interrupted me with a smile.

“Perhaps you’re wrong about that.” He explained, “You found one other type of ink as well, didn’t you? I decided to make use of that. It will be yet another specialty of the region after tonight.”

“What?” I stared at him in disbelief.

“It will be a surprise for later,” he assured me with a mischievous grin. “My father’s absolutely right that you’ve accomplished a lot. Don’t be so modest. If he’s offering a reward, take him up on it.”

“Still,” I hesitantly protested, but everyone else was clearly urging me to back down and accept the king’s reward. With great reluctance, I finally said, “Can I truly ask for anything as my reward?”

His Majesty gave a magnanimous nod. “As the king of Sauslind Kingdom, I swear I will grant whatever request you make, as long as it is within my power to do so.” He sounded less like a proud monarch and more like a father waiting to humor his daughter’s demands.

I still felt guilty for asking anything of him, but since he was offering, I summoned the last of my courage to blurt out, “Once the Holy Night’s Banquet is over...I would like some time off, if I may?”

“Time off?” His iron blue eyes blinked back at me.

For some reason, Queen Henrietta’s face lit up. She held her fan over her mouth as she gave a calm nod. “Splendid idea, Elianna. The designer of your dress also had some other ideas in mind we could try

out. It would be good for us to visit the companies in the capital occasionally as well. Merchants from all over the continent are gathered in Saoura right now. It's a good opportunity to get our hands on some rare fabric."

"Excuse me?" His Highness's elegant smile evaporated as he huffed in disapproval. "You can't be serious, Mother. Why do you think I labored day and night without reprieve for the past couple of weeks? Even the civil officials suffered alongside me, working incessantly so we would have extra time after the holidays."

Prince Theodore stared back at him, horrorstruck. "You actually think you have the right to make such complaints...?"

Right as Her Majesty and His Highness were about to launch into another round of bickering, the king gently held up his hand to stop them. "Are you certain you only want some time off?" he asked.

I studied his face before responding, "Yes. Actually, you see..."

It all started yesterday.

As I busied myself fulfilling my formal duties and making preparations for the Holy Night's Banquet, Lady Sharon suddenly paid me a visit, accompanied by Lady Elen. It was a brief meeting. Apparently, after spending a night to consider her actions, Lady Sharon had decided to come and apologize. Perhaps it was a result of her own stubborn personality, but she seemed to be doing it begrudgingly.

"I may have...gone a bit too far," she admitted. "Perhaps I said too much when I got heated. My behavior was unbecoming. So...I apologize." Lady Sharon bravely bowed her head. The way she handled herself wasn't as perfectly ladylike as one might expect, but she seemed sincere enough.

After a brief moment of hesitation, she explained what had led her to reflect on her actions. "To tell the truth...I don't like how I look. People laugh at me for my curly red hair and freckles. I always admired Lady Mireille for her fair skin and beautiful blue eyes. To me, she was always the ideal princess. But after hearing your story and everything else you said, I realized it wasn't right to force my ideals and values on other people."

"What part of what I said?" I tilted my head at her.

Her lips flared in a pout, but she acquiesced and explained nonetheless. "I knew there were commoners living in poverty, but I never tried to understand what their daily lives were like or how they spent time with their families. Similarly, I only ever looked at how popular Lady Mireille was on the surface. I never tried to understand what her true desires were. That made me realize, I was no different than that dirty, rotten concubine or that cunning duke house."

Lady Sharon was right. She *had* tried to push her own wishes and ideals on everyone else without regard for how the person in question actually felt. Part of being nobility was playing the role you were given, but in spite of that, Lady Sharon was actually trying to understand what Lady Mireille truly wanted. For that, I thought Lady Mireille was truly blessed.

Right as I thought that, Lady Sharon suddenly blurted out the same thing. “You are truly blessed to have the protection of Sauslind’s people, Lady Elianna.”

The earnest way she looked at me made me genuinely happy. My lips naturally softened into a smile.

Lady Sharon’s cheeks flushed as she jerked her chin away. “Even so, Lady Mireille is no less amazing and wonderful!”

“Indeed,” I said. Both Lady Elen and I giggled.

Still sulking, Lady Sharon reached down and plucked something from her luggage. “I’d like to give you this as an apology. I...said some very disrespectful things, and I learned a lot from our conversations.”

I sucked in a breath as I fixated on the object in her hands. It took effort to glance between Lady Sharon and Lady Elen and ask, “Are you certain?”

Lady Elen offered a graceful smile as she said, “Please consider this the dukedom’s way of apologizing and congratulating you on becoming the next crown princess, Lady Elianna.”

Lady Sharon kept a flat tone as she explained, “I am only lending this to you. Once the Holy Night’s Banquet is over, I intend to return straight back to the Miseral Dukedom. I’m concerned about Lady Mireille. So you’ll have to read it before then. I’m taking it back with me whether you finish it or not.” I didn’t hear what she said after that, which included, “Although you could always come with me...”

I was filled with delight, as if I’d been reunited with someone I so admired but had given up on ever seeing again. I took the logbook into my trembling hands and squeezed it to my chest. “Oh, I swear to you, Lady Sharon! I will absolutely finish reading this before you return to the dukedom! Thank you ever so much. Truly, thank you, Lady Sharon, Lady Elen!” I was so blinded by my emotions that I forgot my manners as a noble lady as I showered them with gratitude.

The two stared at me in shock, but I was too distracted to see their faces. My heart was hammering away in anticipation of the unexplored world that lay between the pages of this book.

“...and that is why I would like to take time off, Your Majesty,” I finished.

To tell the truth, even as I was being thrust to and fro attending to my royal duties, half of my heart had remained behind in my room,

bewitched by Ship Captain Vigo's logbook. I still had anxiety about the impending evening party, but I couldn't help praying it would end quickly. The moment it was over, I could finally read my beloved books—finally meet Ship Captain Vigo himself! If His Majesty would grant me some time off, it would be a wonderful, blissful reprieve.

"There are many other books I would love to pore over as well," I confessed. "So many that have piled up over the weeks and months... I would love to read them all. If you might grant me the time to do so, there is no greater reward I could ask for, Your Majesty." Before I even realized what I was doing, both of my hands were clasped together as I practically pleaded with the king.

Both Queen Henrietta and Prince Christopher gawked at me. "She's actually begging him," they both murmured. Unfortunately, I was already too preoccupied with my request to pay them any attention.



His Majesty gave a strained smile and nodded coolly. “Very well. As king, I hereby grant you, Lady Elianna Bernstein, temporary reprieve from any duties you might have. I permit none to interrupt you during your time of rest. You have my word.”

I was so thrilled I couldn’t help blurting out in excitement, “Thank you so much, Your Majesty!” My heart was already taken by the mountain of treasures awaiting me in my room. It had no interest in the evening party still to come. Thus, everything that transpired after that seemed blurred and distorted, as if a mental wall separated me from whatever happened around me.

Queen Henrietta barked at the king, “You are too soft on her!”

“Not nearly as soft as you,” he argued back.

“But the Gral Villa has a lake with swans, and I thought it’d be the perfect trip before our marriage...” Prince Christopher mumbled dejectedly.

Exasperated, Prince Theodore shattered the last of his poor nephew’s dreams by saying, “Alas, Chris, you longed for something fleeting.”

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As our names were read, the prince and I stepped inside the party hall. Immediately, the crowd erupted in a wave of excited whispers and palpable excitement. I almost shrank away in anxiety, but His Highness’s firm grip kept us moving forward.

Part of the fuss was the mixed reactions to my red dress. There were those whose eyes were captured by the stunningly vivid color, but there were also those whose brows were furrowed in dismay at the audacious display. Gossip on either side gradually faded as I trailed further into the room. Despite some thinking it ostentatious, when the light caught my dress, it wasn’t obscenely gaudy—the color remained bold without being overly intrusive. Perhaps my frozen expression helped to silence the onlookers; my nerves had gotten the best of me, and I couldn’t even force a smile.

Admittedly, I couldn’t be as stunning as a whole garden, but as the prince had said, I could be a single blooming rose—one who proudly displayed its petals, dyed with the illustrious pigment of Corba Village’s Milulu Clams.

His Highness wore his usual dazzling smile, looking even more proud than he normally did. That was enough to soften the stiff expression on my face.

In the gaps of nobles lined up around us, I glimpsed two people who had recently been the subject of much scrutiny: the elderly Earl Dauner and his plump viscountess daughter. She was clad in the same

atrocious gown she'd worn the other day. It had a bold, plunging neckline with a panel of plum-colored lace fixed inside.

I spotted no trace of her daughter, Lady Matilda. The prince had mentioned leaving her in a cell overnight to reflect on her actions, but given that she was a noble lady, I couldn't see him being allowed to do something like that so easily. It wasn't as if her actions had directly threatened people's lives. No doubt she'd been thoroughly reprimanded, but was it really so extreme that she'd decided not to attend? Or perhaps she was concerned with the social standing of her family after the incident. Regardless, she wasn't present.

While I felt conflicted over this development, Queen Henrietta proceeded a few steps in front of me with her chest puffed out triumphantly. She was gloating at the viscountess, the latter of whom was grinding her teeth in frustration as she glowered at my dress. The elderly earl tried to hide his own resentful sneer, but he lacked the control to fully mask his emotions. Now that he was no longer a proud, influential military figure, he seemed anxious about how the prying eyes around him might perceive him.

Queen Henrietta harrumphed as she marched past, and the prince squeezed my hand as he swallowed back a laugh. I had my own thoughts on their immaturity, but out of respect for the royal family, I would keep those impressions to myself.

As the king and queen arrived at their dais, the prince and I followed their example and turned to face all of our guests. Prince Theodore joined us as well. Per tradition, his escort was an elderly lady, an extended member of the royal family.

His Majesty cast his gaze around the hall, his sonorous voice booming as he thanked the gods for a year of peace and stability. He also expressed his gratitude for everyone's hard work and prayed the coming year would be just as prosperous. Finally, he bellowed, "Now, play the music!"

At his instruction, a brilliant melody filled the room. We followed the king and queen onto the floor and began the first dance of the night. As I'd anticipated, my dress spread out around me like the petals of a rose in bloom. My stomach was knotted with anxiety the entire time, but the satisfied look on Her Majesty's face was so flattering I couldn't help but smile too.

A chuckle slipped past His Highness's lips as he watched me. His eyes then suddenly turned contemplative. "Eli, I'm sorry." His abrupt apology left me staring blankly up at him. He still had his usual smile plastered on his face, but I could hear the remorse in his tone. "I made that promise with you when we started all of this, but I haven't even kept it recently."

As I stared back into the depths of his eyes, feeling like they might

suck me right in, I recalled what he'd told me four years ago: "*Lady Elianna, you need only stay by my side and read your books.*"

He had made good on that promise. Lately, however, between princess training with Queen Henrietta and my official duties with the Holy Night's Banquet, I'd had very little free time.

Still, that's not his fault, I thought. I needed to tell him as much.

"I was the one who made the decision to be by your side. Everything I am doing right now is necessary to achieve that, so...you needn't worry. I am doing my utmost," I said, growing more insistent the more I spoke.

His Highness smiled. "I know. I'm very well aware of how hard you work for my sake. Although, the fact that I didn't realize you were pushing yourself *too* hard makes me feel like a failure as your fiancé."

"Oh, no..." I started to protest.

"Not to mention I couldn't keep my promise to you, either. You've had to just bear through it all. My mother was right. I really *am* an incompetent prince."

"I think you're a dashing prince," I blurted before thinking. As those blue eyes stared back at me, I felt the heat rise to my cheeks and finally tore my gaze away. My blush extended all the way up to my ears, almost as if the dye from my dress had seeped into my skin. "You're utterly amazing—more than I even deserve. In my eyes...you're the best prince in the world."

Suddenly, the air around us seemed to glow and sparkle. Heat poured in from the prince's hands, one at my back and the other firmly gripping my hand. As we spun around, he casually leaned closer, whispering into my ear. "Say that again, Eli."

"Once was enough," I insisted.

He chuckled, looking genuinely overjoyed. "Eli?"

I lifted my gaze to find affection welling up in his.

"I love you, Elianna."

For a moment, my eyes lost focus. This was an evening party in the palace, and we were in the middle of the opening dance. Perhaps I should have considered the time and place a bit more before we started this conversation. I was so shaken my feet were frozen to the floor.

Nonetheless, His Highness cleverly took the lead, pulling me along with him as if nothing had happened. He had the same laidback expression as always, which made me wonder if those words a moment ago had just been an auditory hallucination. As if sensing my doubt, he turned a smile toward me so full of affection I had to suck in a breath. Now I was convinced I hadn't just been hearing things.

"I'd like a reward, too," he said.

I blinked back at him.

There was something warm and inviting in his next words. "I'd like to have some of your time. Am I being too demanding?"

"No," I said, "that's fine."

"Truly?"

"Of course." I nodded, still feeling like I was hovering high in the clouds as I stared back at him.

A devious grin surfaced on his lips for a split second before disappearing. The moment it was gone, he was back to beaming at me in his usual charming way. "I'll hold you to that."

Why did I feel like I'd just fallen into a demon's trap...?

Once my dance with the prince ended, I took turns with a number of foreign diplomats and ambassadors. Our talks together revolved primarily around my dress. I told them every detail I knew, and they hung on my every word, impressed by what they heard. Word of the pigment spread amongst the attendees.

There were many within Sauslind's nobility that held negative biases toward Corba Village (like Lady Matilda). Their brows drew in disapproval as they heard where the pigment originated. Prime among these, and protesting most loudly, were the two from House Dauner. They spoke as if they were an absolute authority on the matter, wailing about how disgusting the Azul Region was. Their criticism of my dress and the queen for backing me was suggested but never truly spoken. The two had absolute conviction in their beliefs, and for them, this was a rallying point they could use to rebuild political power after being knocked down a peg.

Unfortunately for them...

"The color is delightful. I would love to present such pigment to the king of my country."

The diplomats and dignitaries praised the dress, expressing their interest in importing it back to their countries as gifts for their monarchs. This quelled the voices of criticism, and soon House Dauner was alone in their negative sentiments.

At one point, I found myself surrounded by such a dense gaggle of young noble ladies I couldn't move an inch. The Ashen Nightmare was a distant memory for them, since it had happened fifteen years ago. They didn't share the older generations' prejudices. Instead, they were genuinely curious how they might obtain a dress like this as well.

In a rare display, Queen Henrietta vacated her seat to join me and spread word about the pigment of the Milulu Clams. Countess Eisenach approached to pay her respects to us during all of this. When she heard about how Her Majesty and I had collaborated to create the dress (though my contributions had been indirect), she sighed with envy. "It's now looking like engagement talks with my son have fallen

through. Isn't there an adorable daughter-in-law I can find lying around somewhere?"

Does she think of a daughter-in-law as some fallen piece of fruit she can just pick up off the ground? I wondered.

Queen Henrietta seemed to be in good spirits as she held her fan over her mouth and said, "Glen is a member of Chris's imperial guard. He needs to fix his eyes on the future. I'll do what I can to help in that regard."

It seemed Lord Glen still had many more trials ahead of him.

My brother also came over to pay his respects, escorting Lady Anna on his arm. She was adorned in a stunning indigo blue gown with elegant lace embroidery. It had a subtleness to it that fit her personality perfectly and was pleasing to the eye.

I wasn't sure why, but she looked slightly frustrated as she mumbled under her breath, "I lost the bet..."

When I glanced at Alfred, he gave me his usual tender smile. Our conversation went from the pigment of the Milulu Clams back to the Totti Cave paintings. "You found something amazing," he said. I was genuinely happy to receive such praise from him.

The tie Alfred was wearing matched the navy blue hues of Lady Anna's eyes and dress perfectly. When she looked over at him, her cheeks colored with a faint blush. My heart warmed as I watched them, and I couldn't help imagining where their relationship might lead in the near future.

As I exchanged words with those who came to greet me, my cousins and aunt charged over and surrounded me, demanding to know why I hadn't told them about the pigment sooner. I stared back at them, dumbfounded. Apparently the ladies of House Storrev had already ordered an array of different colored dresses for the new year. Instead of canceling and ordering new ones with the pigment, they started discussing what red-themed decorations and adornments might best suit their new garments.

They were very adamant about not wearing the same color of dress as me, claiming it would "lose its novelty" if they did. Whatever that meant. Their lively energy surrounded me, keeping me preoccupied until the banquet was well over halfway over. By that point, my aunt had pulled me away from Queen Henrietta and to a group of middle-aged noblewomen.

"Elianna..."

When I glanced back, I noticed a bunch of young noblemen standing around, though the prince's presence as he appeared before me seemed to overwhelm them.

"Preparations for tonight's special reveal are complete. Come with me."

“All right.”

As we started to pull away from the crowd, he turned his dazzling smile to the other noblewomen. “You ladies look beautiful tonight. Care to join us? I can promise you a sight that will take your breath away and make your heart pound like it never has at any banquet before.” He beamed with confidence.

Laughter carried on behind us as the noblewomen followed, creating a wave effect as the young noblemen around them joined in. In turn, the young ladies who had been eyeing those men were swept up by our movement as well. As our large group made its way across the floor, others turned their attention to us. By the time we made our way onto the balcony facing the royal gardens, the entire venue was trailing behind us and piling out into the cool night air.

“Sorry, it’s a bit cold out here,” His Highness whispered. He stood at the front of our group, smiling gently at me as he placed his hands over my exposed shoulders in hopes of providing a little warmth. Feeling his bare skin against mine made my pulse quicken. He pulled me closer, trying to protect me from the chill in the air.

“U-Um, yes...” I felt a bit flustered at our close contact in front of so many people. I thought about protesting, but someone else cut in.

“I am looking forward to seeing what entertainment you cooked up with Theo,” said the king.

Her Majesty gave a haughty snort. “I doubt it’s anything as grand as the dress I had designed for Elianna.”

Unruffled, the prince replied, “Keep your eyes peeled. You’re in for a real treat.” There was something mischievous in his expression as he motioned down at Prince Theodore to begin.

Several fir trees had been carried into the royal gardens, though they were currently covered with black sheets. Prince Theodore nodded to the soldiers standing around them as he said, “Kill the fires.” Following his command, they smothered the nearby flames.

The garden was bathed in darkness for a moment, until the fabric was yanked off the trees. Gasps rang out from the crowded balcony as people looked on in wonder. Even I found myself choking on the frozen air as I sucked in a breath, shocked at what I saw.

Shining faintly upon the trees were drawings of birds and butterflies. It was like something straight out of a fairytale. The drawings almost seemed to be dancing, the way they hummed with light.

“Just what...is this?” His Majesty gawked.

I had a feeling I knew. “Your Highness, don’t tell me this is...?”

“That’s right, it’s the luminescent ink you created.”

“Luminescent?” the king echoed, curious.

I shrank a bit under his gaze.

When I first set out to create ink using the Milulu Clams, I sought the cooperation of the herbalists in the Pharmacy Lab. None of them carried the same prejudices as Earl Dauner and his ilk. They were all medical scholars researching how the people in Corba Village had survived the Ashen Nightmare. They had already looked into what the villagers' dietary habits were, what the climate was for the region, and what unusual customs, if any, were practiced there. They were trying to pin down anything that could work as a cure or treatment for the plague. Naturally, they had already conducted an examination into the Milulu Clams as well.

They were at a deadlock in their research when I requested their help to create the ink. They were happy to oblige, seeing it as a welcome distraction. When I brought the clams to them, we found some with scaled insects who had taken up residence inside. Remembering how these had been used for pigmentation in makeup before, I decided we should try using them for ink as well. Some minerals from the Azul region had gotten mixed in during the process, but since these were just samples, we weren't too concerned about the contamination.

What resulted was a milky, pure white ink that left absolutely nothing visible behind when you used it on paper. We were certain it was nothing more than a failed product and set it aside. Just a few days later, rumors started about there being ghosts in the capital's Pharmacy Lab.

"It comes drifting into the middle of the lab every night," people said.

"It's the spirit of an herbalist who died in the middle of their research, full of regrets."

"No, I heard one of the researchers was so obsessed with their work their emotions manifested in the form of a phantom that now haunts the place."

All sorts of gossip made the rounds, but the true cause of people's paranoia was the ink. The mix we had concocted somehow became visible in the dark. Our true aim was to recreate the same ink that had been used in centuries past, so it was mere coincidence that we stumbled across this discovery. I couldn't think of any purpose luminescent ink might serve, however, so I had explained the source of the ghost rumors and handed my samples over to the prince. After that, I'd completely forgotten about the incident.

The prince briefly summarized all that had transpired before going into the specifics about the glowing reliefs we saw before us. "According to the researchers, the source of this light is a substance called phosphorescence. They had never seen it in liquid form before, though. The Azul Region is well known for their handicrafts, so I had

them draw pictures of birds and butterflies on the outer shells of the Milulu Clams and then paint the insides as well. That's what makes the drawings look as if they're popping out of the darkness."

His Majesty nodded thoughtfully. "So that's how you did it."

"Um," I cleared my throat, feeling a bit quizzical, "when I gave you the ink, there wasn't very much of it. Not nearly enough to accomplish something of this scale."

"Indeed, it wasn't enough. I had to enlist the herbalists to mass produce it. Since they had worked with you to create it in the first place, they were the only ones who knew how to make it."

"That makes sense," I mumbled. How he'd managed to get them to create so much in such a short amount of time still mystified me, but I got the sense I was better off not asking.

His Highness continued, "With Uncle's help, I also had the royal family's crest inscribed on the front of the store serving free mulled wine. Word of it should already be spreading among the people. We'll be keeping this ink under the royal family's control for the moment, since we're still looking into possible uses, and we want to make sure no one abuses it."

The king stroked his chin. "Seems like a fine idea. Incidentally, is this also your solution to combat the steep price jump for firewood and charcoal in the winter?"

"Correct. Every year as the Holy Night's Banquet approaches, night grows longer and costs for those resources soar. Poor and underpopulated villages have been complaining about it. By making this a specialty product, I'm hoping we can reduce those expenses for people. I did have a few other ideas in mind as well...but this one was thanks to Eli's ingenuity." The prince smiled over at me.

Queen Henrietta seemed simultaneously exasperated and amused as she said, "And by doing this, you and Elianna will be even more popular with the people."

"No doubt about that," the king agreed, exchanging looks with his wife as they smiled between them.

I was still standing there dumbfounded, not entirely sure how my discovery of glow-in-the-dark ink had led to this.

Meanwhile, the foreign diplomats and dignitaries were all astonished at this revelation and eagerly began asking us questions about it. The prince left the king and queen to deal with them, pulling me to a less crowded spot. I found my gaze wandering and somehow spotted Earl Dauner and his daughter vacantly staring out at the scene in the garden.

"I feel bad for doing this without your permission," the prince suddenly interrupted, "but I used the exclusive sale rights of this ink as a bargaining chip to win over the Dorud Company. I have no plans

of running an autocracy, and in fact, I don't think it's a bad thing to have people criticize my policies. Without their critiques, I wouldn't realize the flaws in what I'm doing."

Intense emotion swelled in his eyes. "That said, when a person's views are clouded by bias and they think extolling praise on the military supersedes the importance of flood management, then I cannot allow them to remain in a position of power. Especially not when they mistakenly take those corrupt values for strengths. I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble because I took so long in dealing with him." As he apologized, his gaze was just as earnest as it had been the other day.

I quickly shook my head, and his lips cracked into a smile. "Anyway, Eli, your latest discovery proved extremely helpful. Thank you."

"Was I truly able to be of use to you?"

His Highness's eyes danced with amusement. "Of course. I have no doubt the pigment from the Milulu Clam *and* the luminescent ink will be a sensation. As interest grows throughout the country, so too will the need for bridges across the Azul Region. I do wish Marquess Bernstein would grant us a more substantial budget for that purpose, but...he's a stingy one."

Hearing about my father's work made me smile.

The prince reached over and gently cupped my cheek. "You're like the wind that pushes my sails forward. Thank you, my dear, sweet Bibliophile Princess." He planted the softest of kisses on my forehead as if I were his treasure.

Embarrassment and joy bubbled up in my chest as I replied in kind. "I'm glad I was able to be of use to you, my beloved prince."

His blue eyes blinked once, staring at me. Right then, something tiny and white began fluttering down between us.



“Ah, it’s snow,” the people around us gasped.

Drawn by the sound of their voices, the prince and I turned our eyes up at the sky. It was a marvelous sight; the glow of the ink from the fir trees illuminated the white flakes dancing all around us.

His Highness turned his kind smile toward me. “Let’s do this again at the next Holy Night’s Banquet. I’m looking forward to another year together with you, my soon-to-be wife.”

There was only one way for me to reply to that. “As am I, my soon-to-be husband.”

I was so happy in that moment as we grinned at one another. I had no way of knowing the trials and turmoil that would await me. Nor could I have foreseen that the pigment from the Milulu Clams would come to be referred to as “Azul Red” and would spread not only across Sauslind but the rest of the continent as well.

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A few days later, Lord Glen triumphantly regained his freedom after engagement talks were dropped, and he stopped by to secretly ask me a question. “About that piglet from before...what actually happened to him in the end?”

I stared blankly back at him. He had a slight blush on his cheeks, likely embarrassed to be bringing this up, but his eyes were earnest with a desire to know the end of the story. Lord Glen was an honest man, as a member of the imperial guard should be, but he also had a hidden boyish curiosity. I suspected that was what drew so many women to him.

Finally I smiled and said, “That’s a story for another time.”

Arc 2: Race of the Social Outcasts

“Hmm. Well, at the moment, the favorite and most likely to win is probably Prince Chris. Regardless of what other people think, he’s secured himself a pretty solid position.”

The end of the year was fast approaching here at the palace. As I helped Lady Elianna deliver some documents, I used the opportunity to secretly update some of the civil officials on the bets those of us within the inner palace were conducting.

Why were we betting, you wonder? Thanks to a certain highly esteemed individual within the royal family (and his personal matters), the civil officials were being worked into an early grave. The burden on them this year was far worse than years prior. As a way to relieve the cloud of doom hovering over them, I came up with the idea of doing this bet.

That’s right. I was giving them something to aim their pent-up frustrations at because I was a loyal servant to my liege and my kingdom. Patriotic to the very core of my soul!

That’s right, I’m not ashamed to sing my own praises.

Don’t get the wrong idea. It wasn’t like I did this because I resented the prince for dragging me into it or anything like that. It was a casual idea I came up with as a way to make a little extra money without landing myself in trouble.

“Okay... I get the prince, but why are these other contenders even in the running?” asked one of the officials, bewildered.

“Hm?” I glanced down at the page he was referring to and nodded when I realized. “You just started working here this past spring, right? Then it’s no wonder you don’t know. All right, I’ll give a special rundown on the race and its contenders. We’ll have to rewind four years into the past, but once I’m done, you should have a better idea of who you want to take your chances on.”

And so I, Alan Ferrera, gave this man my exclusive commentary on the other players in the race.

Contender #1 - The Chief Herbalist

“Gehehe, I’ve got dried earthworms in this jar here, perfect for bringing down fevers and curing poison. This one has empty cicada shells in it. It’s also good for reducing fevers and helps reduce itching from hives. Oh yes, this one! I just got a resupply of this yesterday. It’s a type of snake called the Hundred Flower Snake. You cut it open like this and let it dry out. Works wonders on joint pain for old folks like me,” the old man explained.

Any other noble lady hearing such painstaking and grotesque detail would faint on the spot, but the girl standing there instead looked thoughtful as she examined each vial with great intrigue. “Is this one bear’s bile?”

“Smart girl! You’ve got a good eye. That’s right, this is a bear’s gallbladder. Very valuable. Helps strengthen the heart.”

“I read a book before, *Spring in the North*, that mentioned bear bile in a story about the region’s development,” said the young noble lady. “It went into great detail about hunting and mentioned that, when dissecting a bear, one should be sure not to overlook the gallbladder because of the high price it could fetch.”

“Oho, quite diligent with your studies, hm? Ah, this is from a sea lion, supplied by the Miseral Dukedom. A young lady like you doesn’t have to worry about your lover needing the effects of that any time soon.” The old man snickered.

The young lady tilted her head, bewildered, her fluffy hair sweeping to the side. “I don’t have a lover.”

“Oh?” He grinned with amusement.

I had to clench my jaw to keep from bursting out in laughter as I watched their exchange.

We were in a remote part of the inner palace. Sunlight rarely reached this area, and people kept their distance from the department located here. The old man had a number of medicinal supplies lining his shelf, safely tucked away to keep them hidden from the light. The vials and jars were crammed full of dead insects and various animal parts. Adding to the ominous atmosphere, there was a shadow hanging from the ceiling—something that had likely once been a living creature.

Strange smoke spilled out from a nearby pot as something simmered inside of it. Combined with the rancid smell that hit your

nose the moment you walked in, it only served to cement one's ill impression of this place.

The only person to enter the room without compunction and timidly request knowledge about herbal medicine was the aforementioned noble lady. She had arrived at the palace recently, as the fiancée of Sauslind's crown prince. The name of this fourteen-year-old girl was Lady Elianna Bernstein. She had fluffy, platinum-colored hair and ashen gray eyes that shone with innocence. Her doll-like facial features were adorable but generally lacked emotion.

Lady Elianna showed no disgust or approval at what she saw or heard in this room. In fact, curiosity burned in her eyes as she listened intently to the old man's words. You could tell with just a glance that she was a different breed from the other noble ladies who had been pampered from birth.

I had a general idea about what type of person she was from all the reports the prince had received on her, but she was even more entertaining than I'd imagined. It took great effort on my part to stifle my amusement.

The old man seemed to share my sentiments. He was famous, a leading figure in herbal medicine and the chief herbalist at this research department. As he watched Lady Elianna, he chortled. "Quite the tough one you are, milady. That golden colt of ours may look flawless, but he's a clumsy boy. I'll enjoy seeing whether he can win you over or not."

She cocked her head, bewildered by his mutterings.

As he proceeded with his lecture on herbal medicine, the old man kept his eyes on her, watching her like she was a highly intriguing lab specimen.

I hummed under my breath, fascinated. Currently, I was disguised as a lowly researcher from this department so I could keep an eye on her.

My employer, the prince, was renowned not only throughout Sauslind but the surrounding countries as well. He was noble and wise, with a promising future ahead of him. He was handsome, charismatic, and a perfect gentleman with the ladies. All of the women of the court stared longingly after him, affection in their hearts. He conducted himself with grace, his every movement polished to perfection. To top it all off, he was even strong enough with the sword to best Lord Glen of the imperial guard in one round out of three in a sparring match. The crown prince, Sauslind's pride and joy, truly was beyond all reproach.

Except...that was all just a facade he wore for the public. Only those of his inner circle knew his true face beneath that mask.

Despite how few knew the prince intimately, this old man had

accurately seen through the ruse, calling him clumsy. Just as this bizarre young lady had captured the prince's interest and proven to be amusing in her own right, I had a feeling this keen-eyed old man would prove entertaining as well. My intuition on things like this, much like my ability to sense and avoid danger, was highly accurate.

Contender #2 - Herb Researchers

The Pharmacy Lab had been a highly regarded department when they spearheaded the study of treatments for the Ashen Nightmare back when the plague was sweeping over the kingdom. Now that the disease had gone dormant and the country was on its way to recovery, their research lab had been relegated to the shadows, as if all the importance once placed on them had never existed.

Given how humans processed emotion, it wasn't unreasonable for things to end that way. Now that the smell of death no longer hung thick in the air and things had gone quiet, no one wanted to dig up memories of the past by associating themselves with the researchers. While people understood the importance of their work, those same people gave the department a wide berth. Who wanted to remember the shadows when they were finally stepping out into the light?

Ostracizing the researchers became the norm, and in the blink of an eye, ten years had passed. The researchers had grown weary with fatigue, on the brink of giving up all hope, when one day a pampered-looking princess wandered into their midst without warning.

While none of the other court ladies or maids in the palace would approach their lab, this girl frequented it with a curiosity about their research and an eagerness to learn more. It was clear from the earnest light in her eyes and the way she readily jumped in to help that she wasn't there to mock them like other noble ladies might.

Her appearance alone was plenty adorable. It was obvious by the way their faces glowed that these social outcasts regarded her as a Fairy Princess that had abruptly fallen into their mix. Not long ago they'd all looked gloomy and lifeless, boiling their herbs in the darkness, leading to rumors that they were witch's henchmen. Now, not even a trace of their melancholy remained.

They still spent their days in a dark corner of the palace where the sun didn't reach, but the lab was now being meticulously cleaned and fresh air was filtering through. Any suspicious, unidentifiable objects that were once hanging from the ceiling had been removed, and the eerie atmosphere had softened into something a bit less discomforting. Granted, the reason it was being so thoroughly cleaned was because of a small incident Lady Elianna had caused.

Regardless, while the rest of the palace avoided them, she came with a passion to learn. How could any of them resist her? No doubt

her adorable appearance made them even more fond of the girl.

“Miss Elianna, could you get me the aloe and turmeric vials?”

The crown prince’s betrothed had smoothly transitioned and made herself an unofficial apprentice in the research lab. Even today she was obediently assisting the other members in their work.

Lady Elianna *had* introduced herself properly from the beginning. The chief herbalist had realized who she was, but the other members of the department were estranged from the rest of society. Unaware of her title, they thought of her as just an ordinary person. Thus, they showed no hesitation in treating her like an assistant.

After handing off the requested supplies, Lady Elianna peered curiously at the researcher’s hands. “What medicine is this?”

“Stomach medicine. We already filled a request for it from the prime minister just the other day. Apparently his stomachache still hasn’t gotten better, though.”

“That certainly is concerning,” she said, seeming genuinely worried for him.

I had to clap a hand over my mouth to keep from doubling over in laughter.

Just the other day, the prime minister had come to the research lab complaining about his stomach. When he spotted Lady Elianna there, he’d looked utterly horrified. “Why in the world are you here...?” he’d muttered.

At the same time, Lady Elianna had accidentally dumped sulfur powder everywhere. After inhaling and choking violently on it, the prime minister had fled the scene, unable to say another word. The rotten egg smell contributed to rumors that the researchers were carrying out highly suspicious “experiments,” though the stench alone was enough to make people avoid the lab even more than they already had. Both of these things had only further contributed to the prime minister’s stomach pain.

“Oh, Miss Elianna, that’s powder from a charred monkey’s head. It’s quite precious, so don’t touch it, all right? The chief herbalist went to great lengths to acquire that.”

“Yes, I understand.” Curiosity filled those ashen gray eyes of hers as she examined the monkey’s skull. The chief herbalist had left it perched on top of a velvet cushion, treating it with as much reverence as one might with the king’s crown.

I thought the chief herbalist had strange tastes, but the same could be said about the researchers. They were rambling about the efficacy of burned newts and dragonflies in an attempt to woo Lady Elianna. The girl hanging on their every word with great interest was no doubt a rare and incredible woman, but she also lacked the common sense of most normal people. Using her as a basis for comparison against other

noble ladies would give a warped sense of the fairer sex.

This was probably also why it never even occurred to them that she might be the crown prince's betrothed. I pitied them for their ignorance, but at the same time, their daily comedy was helping me build some strong stomach muscles as I tried to hold my laughter in.

"Uh, um, Miss Elianna? They're going to have a lecture downtown called *Doctor Faust's Beloved: The Demon's Poisonous Plant*. W-Would you like to go together?" One of the relatively younger researchers managed to pluck up his courage and invite her out on a date.

There was another researcher nearby, actively mixing together some herbs in his mortar. He scowled the moment he heard and interrupted, "Wait just a minute. It's not fair for you to jump in front of the rest of us. Miss Elianna, some rare carnivorous plants at the botanical gardens are supposed to be in bloom right now. How about we go see them together?"

"Carnivorous plants? You must be joking. Someone as adorable as Miss Elianna wouldn't have any interest in that. Your lack of sense is why your herbal mixtures are always second-rate."

"You've got some nerve. A demon's poisonous plant is far less tasteful than what I'm suggesting."

"You're wrong about that. It's the beautiful flowers that tend to be the poisonous ones."

As the two broke out in a verbal spat, the lady caught in the middle just stared blankly between the two of them.

There was one other place in the palace Lady Elianna frequented: the royal archives, curated by Prince Theodore. Since Marquess Bernstein had worked there previously, the staff was already familiar with Lady Elianna and her engagement status. Additionally, the prince had kept a watchful eye on her, so none of the noblemen in society could casually approach her and strike up conversation. She'd scarcely talked to men, much less received romantic advances from them. Thus, Lady Elianna seemed to think the opposite sex didn't hold much interest in her.

The chief herbalist ignored his quarreling subordinates, cradling documents in one hand as he called out to the girl. "Gehehe. Milady, *The Travels of Parco Molo* certainly was an intriguing read. Eastern medicine proposes a concept of meridian channels in the body. It seems to be similar to acupuncture... If you strike someone in the right place, you can put them in a state of paralysis that mimics death. It also has some stuff about how to handle a bear if you encounter one in the mountains."

"My lady," an elderly researcher chimed in behind him, "the medicinal herb in this book is something we don't have on the Ars Continent. However, as you had hoped, it may be effective in treating

that internal imbalance affecting some women.”

“Truly?” Instantly, all of her attention and interest were drawn toward the two old men, and the three began talking animatedly over the contents of the book. By the end, they were already prepping to create a sample of this medicine.

Lady Elianna was even popular among the older, married men. They were delighted to have a girl as young as their granddaughter eagerly taking part in their research.

Sadly, what next unfolded was nothing short of a comedy skit. One of the two that had been squabbling bumped into someone who had been in the midst of mixing. The man cried out as he stumbled, sending powder flying everywhere as the pestle slipped from his hand. Miraculously, it landed in someone else’s mortar, sending the herbs inside shooting through the air. This airborne mixture just happened to land right in the pot that Lady Elianna and the two elderly researchers were using to create their sample.

“Ah!” everyone cried out in unison the minute it happened.

A second later, the contents of the pot exploded, sending pitch black smoke billowing throughout the room. The whole room froze, and everyone went silent.

The girl with the platinum-colored hair that so resembled a doll now looked like a baby tanuki, her entire body covered in soot. Her ashen gray eyes blinked in surprise as she coughed.

Things only got worse after that.

“What in the world was all that noise?” The man who suddenly appeared had a dazzling smile on his face, but there was something about his voice that made me seize in terror.

This adorable flower was not only deadly in her own right, but she also had a demon lord attached to her.

Contender #3 - The Shadow

Bodyguard, Scarecrow

So... His name and identity are under strict confidentiality, so for the purposes of our story, I'll be referring to him as "Scarecrow."

As implied by his job title, Scarecrow protects Lady Elianna from the shadows and—what? You're saying it's only natural for him to be with her because he's her bodyguard? You find it strange for him to be a possible candidate in a bet to see who Lady Elianna spends her new year's break with?

Okay, yeah, I get what you're saying, but hear me out. Lady Elianna loves books so much she's earned the epithet "Bibliophile Princess." The prince is planning a pre-wedding retreat at Gral Villa, but if she forsakes him and chooses instead to spend her time at home reading, then who will she be spending the most time with? Her bodyguard, right?

For that reason, I happen to think Scarecrow is the dark horse of this race. Whoops, I'm letting my personal opinions slip too much. Anyway, let me tell you a little bit of the struggles I've seen him experience these past four years.

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A few moments prior to the explosion in the lab, I had approached Scarecrow out of concern. "Those guys are making a move on her. That spells trouble for us. How are we going to get out of this?"

Scarecrow was a man with a slender build and a rather unnoteworthy appearance. I had only recently learned that his job (and subsequently employer) was the same as mine. His mission was to tag along behind Lady Elianna as she puttered about the palace.

He was standing in a corner of the room, yawning, a bored look on his face. He ignored the fuss going on in the background, keeping Lady Elianna within view but never really looking *at* her as he shrugged at me. "Eh, who cares? The prince only said we have to protect her. Never told me to intervene in whatever she's doin'."

"Well..." I muttered thoughtfully, "it's true that this *has* been entertaining to watch."

"I made sure to get rid of any of the nasty lookin' stuff, so she's not in any danger. I'm doin' what he asked me to do, so he's got no

reason to complain.” His mouth gaped in another yawn. “Anyway, think I’ll take a nap.”

It was hard to tell just how seriously this man was or wasn’t taking his job. I believed him when he said he’d eliminated any possible danger around her, but was it really okay to leave those guys who were hitting on her? I could just imagine the vein popping up on Prince Chris’s forehead now.

Scarecrow had been guarding Lady Elianna since before she moved to the capital. Had he also turned a blind eye to men’s advances on her then, too? I could picture yet another vein popping on Prince Chris’s forehead.

I glanced back at the researchers. There were plenty of them to use as potential sacrifices to keep ourselves safe at least. And just as I was thinking that, the explosion happened.

Lady Elianna was covered in soot, and just in time for our employer to arrive on the scene and witness it. Before I sped out of the danger zone, I paused to ask Scarecrow, “I thought you said she wouldn’t be in any danger?”

“...Guess I underestimated those herbs. The lady and those researchers are a volatile combination.” A cold sweat formed on his brow. It seemed even Scarecrow hadn’t predicted this turnout.

The prince’s sudden appearance at the lab left the researchers scrambling to accommodate his arrival.

Lady Elianna turned to him, a surprised look on her soot-covered face. “Prince Christopher, why are you...? Do you need something? Are you not feeling well?”

Despite the pitiful state of his betrothed, the prince still flashed his usual dazzling smile at her. “You should be worrying about yourself more than me. I came to search for you since I didn’t see you in the archives.”

Her eyes shuttered as if processing what he was saying. She gave him a formal apology before tilting her head curiously. “Did you need something from me?” It was clear by the way she asked that Lady Elianna saw no other reason he’d want to meet with her if he didn’t have any business with her.

The prince’s lips pulled even tighter as he produced a handkerchief and tried to wipe her face.

“No thank you,” she said, turning him away. “You’ll only get it dirty.” Instead, she accepted a rag from one of the elderly researchers and began to wipe herself down.

That was enough for me to decide. *Yep, I’m getting the heck out of here.*

I could hear Scarecrow muttering behind me. “Anyone got one of those needles they can stick me with so it looks like I’m dead? At least

'til this blows over.”

I prayed for his well-being as I fled the scene.



Contender #4 - Prince Christopher

That's right, the big favorite to win all this, as I'm sure you all know. The guy has spent four long years battling for her affection. Not surprising it took him so long; the object of his desire doesn't exactly have a sense for romance. Even after she arrived at the palace, she spent all her time in the archives reading or at the Pharmacy Lab making merry with the crackpot old men who fawned over a burnt monkey's skull.

Even when Lady Elianna did have some free time, she spent it attending the queen's tea parties. It was no wonder the prince felt so irritable. He could never find time to spend just the two of them.

Fortunately, His Highness is a tenacious individual. He kept doggedly chasing her like some kind of crazed—oh my, how rude of me. Ahem. What I meant to say is, our handsome prince displayed impressive determination and, through hard work, finally won the fair maiden over.

Yeah, see, the whole world thinks of him as some kind of natural-born genius, but I think he just works hard to make it seem that way.

Hm? You want to know what happened to those researchers in the lab?

Weeeell... You see...

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I'd escaped from the scene, so I had no idea how the disaster had played out after that. According to what I heard from Scarecrow, the researchers finally discovered Lady Elianna's true identity. Granted, they were still pretty dense when it came to the ways of the world, so those idiots didn't comprehend what a fiancée was at first.

"Fiancée? That some kind of fancy foreign delicacy or something?" they had asked.

To make matters worse, one of the younger researchers blurted out, "Huh? But Miss Elianna told us she didn't have a lover."

The man was never seen or heard from again.

Just kidding! Not that it'd be any laughing matter if it were true. At any rate, the man was transferred to a different department. By the time he finally returned to us, he'd become a holy man, having shaved off all his hair and freed himself of worldly desires. What in the world could have happened to him? For as curious as I was, I sensed the

danger that snooping might entail and abandoned any effort to find out. Even now, the details of his absence from the lab remain a mystery.

Lady Elianna became a frequent visitor to the lab. In turn, that meant the prince and his inner circle began stopping by as well. Their periodic appearances reinforced the weight of Lady Elianna's status among the researchers.

Soon, the Pharmacy Lab went from a department operating in the shadows of the palace to a prominent division receiving the attention of the crown prince and his betrothed. That also contributed to Lady Irene's misunderstanding about Lady Elianna drugging the royal family this past spring...but I'll spare you the details of that.

I'm sure you're all already aware of the most recent happenings in the lab as well. At the beginning of summer, the researchers began their quest to produce ink. It was shortly after Lady Elianna returned from the Autumn Hunting Festival that rumors of a phantom in the lab began to spread.

After Prince Chris explained it was the ink, the very lady responsible for its creation furrowed her brows, puzzled. "We weren't able to create such a thing with fireflies. How did this combination manage to produce such ink...?"

"Perhaps a lucky boon," shrugged the prince. "I digress, Eli. Are you sure I can have this? It could be very valuable depending on how it's used."

She tilted her head, thinking. "I'm not sure how you could possibly use it when you can't write with it." As a book enthusiast, it was pretty well cemented in Lady Elianna's mind that ink's only purpose was to write with.

"Hmm," His Highness spoke with amusement. His lips quirked, and his eyes shone with an affection that seemed to beckon her closer. "I'll have to find some way to convey my gratitude for this, then."

"Pardon? No, you don't have to do that." Lady Elianna seemed to realize where this conversation was going and took a step back.

Prince Christopher's eyes wandered over to the table. His smile grew wider. "You had some cacao brought in, I see. Going to drink some hot cocoa with Alfred again?"

"Oh, um, yes. Though, cacao also has some medicinal uses as well."

"Hm, you don't say," he remarked absently. "Well, I do know how much you dislike sweet things."

As his smile grew bigger, the prince pressed in closer. Everyone else in the room watched as he cast his spell on her to keep her from moving. "Say, Eli, there's something else that tastes sweeter than candy and will bring you even greater happiness. Tell me, do you

know what cacao means in the language of flowers?” His hand ghosted over her cheek before his fingertips stopped to caress her lips.

Lady Elianna turned bright red as she stammered, “Y-Your Highness, I don’t think...”

She was trying to tell him this wasn’t an appropriate time since there were other people present, but Prince Chris was definitely doing this on purpose, knowing they were watching. The whole lab was their audience—the same people she’d been working closely with just days before to create the ink. They all knew her status by now, but four years had cultivated a close, relaxing atmosphere between them and her.

The researchers watched from the sidelines with frustration and sadness. Some even lamented quietly.

“It wasn’t like this four years ago!”

“So this is what it feels like to watch as someone violates your precious, adorable granddaughter.”

“Chief, you said you read about meridian channels. Is there anything in those eastern medicine books that could help remove this curse from her?” another of the researchers asked in desperation.

The researchers were all on the same page about one thing at least: the demon lord had taken their beautiful Fairy Princess hostage.

Contender #5 - Queen Henrietta, the Anomaly

Compared to her son, the queen might not seem like a promising contender. Yet Her Majesty had a big influence on Lady Elianna, although she kept herself out of the Pharmacy Lab's affairs.

Queen Henrietta had suffered from the Ashen Nightmare personally. As a result, she was naturally interested in any progress the researchers made, but she also had to dispel any negative notions high society had about her in the aftermath of her battle with the plague. That put her in a position where she couldn't proactively approach the people studying it.

However, with Lady Elianna's failed experiments causing all kinds of fuss at the palace, people's impressions were beginning to change for the better. The queen was eventually able to accompany Lady Elianna and visit the lab herself. Though lately, she seemed more interested in having the researchers turn the ink into a dye than she was in having them find a cure for the disease. Given the researchers' change in focus recently, it was hard to deny they'd been derailed from their original mission.

Nonetheless, it was thanks to Lady Elianna that people regarded their department in a new light. She had even helped them discover a brand new herb, as well. Not a single person at the lab was dissatisfied with the direction things were going in. Some of them (surprisingly) even continued trying to invite Lady Elianna out on dates. Although, they made an enemy out of Prince Chris in the process.

To the researchers, Queen Henrietta and Lady Elianna looked like an adorable mother and daughter. It wasn't unreasonable to think that someone as accommodating as Lady Elianna would oblige the queen if she suggested they spend the new year's break together.

As for any other possible contenders, hm...

I double checked the sheaf of papers I had with me, listing the odds for each candidate. "Hm, Alexei is a possibility, too. Maybe. If he were to use Lady Elianna, it'd be as bait to lure Prince Chris into doing more work. Though he doesn't have enough influence for that to plausibly happen..."

There was one atypical contender high on the list that made me grin when I spotted his name. "Actually, some of the guys in the

imperial guard are betting on Glen. ‘We have to spend the year’s end without female companionship, so why should the prince get to enjoy any?!’ was their reasoning. It’s less like they’d bet on Glen because they thought he could win and more likely they wanted to curse His Highness for having a partner when they didn’t.” As an afterthought, I added, “Oh, and keep that part between us.”

After some more thought, I continued, “Let’s see... There’s also some that are betting she’ll spend the break with her family—specifically Alfred or Marquess Bernstein. Prince Theodore is another potential contender as well, but even if she does spend her break in the royal archives, we aren’t counting that as time spent with Prince Theodore. His chances are pretty slim as a result.”

I shrugged and then surveyed the faces of the officials crowding around me. *Can’t forget to flash a smile at them, too!*

“Anyway, those are the contenders for this year’s race. Of course, you’re welcome to bet on someone who isn’t currently listed in the lineup, if you like. If no one else bets on them and they win the race, you get all the money for yourself. You might be swimming in cash come the new year. Ahh, so many possible ways you could spend that kind of fortune!”

I could see the dreamy looks in their eyes as they imagined piles of money falling right into their lap. In the next second, they were all clamoring for me like housewives at a bargain sale, desperate to make their bids on who they thought would win.

I grinned. “Okay, everyone, bets start at ten dora a person!”

At that time, I had no way of knowing the insane turn this race would take at the end.

Final Runner - The True Dark Horse

Sauslind finally welcomed in the new year.

Given that all of the departments had gone on break for the time being, the palace was deserted with no signs of life. The only people there fell into one of two categories: they were either workaholics or in highly important positions with never-ending piles of paperwork. Then there were people like Alexei who fell into both categories. He was currently in his office, busily filling out paperwork.

With a bounce in my step and a grin on my lips, I wandered into his office. As I'd expected, contender number three shot past the finish line. Most had bet on Prince Chris, certain he had the best chance. Thanks to that, even after I passed off part of the winnings to those who had bet on Scarecrow, I'd still have plenty left to fill my pockets.

I'll have to hand over their portion once the new year break is over, I thought to myself, satisfied with how this year was shaping up already.

Alfred suddenly entered the room, carrying some correspondence he was delivering personally. As the prime minister's assistant, it wasn't surprising he was being forced to work through the break as well. With so many others gone for the holidays, those still at the palace had to deliver any letters themselves.

The three of us engaged in some idle conversation, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere that came with most of the palace being empty. This was interrupted when noise reverberating just outside the door caught our attention. After a brief moment of clamor, our esteemed prince suddenly flew into the room.

"Fred!" His hair was disheveled, and his eyes glowed with rage. It was a rare look for our future monarch. Especially since his anger usually tended to be like ice, freezing the atmosphere as it swelled.

Alfred, who'd prompted this shocking change in His Highness, regarded the prince with his usual gentle demeanor. He seemed neither surprised nor taken aback. "Is something wrong, Prince Christopher?"

"Yes, something is wrong!" His Highness snapped. "Eli was supposed to be reading at home. Why is she off on some trip in a neighboring town?! And what's this I hear that she's with some unknown man?!" There was such bite in his words that he looked ready to start trading blows with Alfred.

The moment he realized his little sister's information had been leaked, Alfred's gentle eyes went hard and cold. But he kept his soft smile as he said, "He's not 'unknown.' Uncle Andrew is my father's younger brother."

"Uncle, you say?"

Alfred nodded. "Yes. You know we have an archaeologist in the family, correct? He's constantly traveling across the continent and rarely finds the time to come home. This year we were lucky enough to have him visit, so we encouraged Eli to go with him. After all, she won't have the opportunity to do that anymore after this spring, now will she?"

He had a point; once they exchanged vows, Lady Elianna would be an official member of the royal family. She would have few opportunities to go traveling at her leisure. The freedoms she enjoyed right now would be gone.

Prince Christopher must have realized this as well because he sobered quickly. But there was still a distinct bitterness on his face as he said, "Still, you could have at least told me. I would have made room in my schedule so I could accompany—"

"Excuse me?" Alex interjected, the temperature in the room taking a sharp dive. "I must have heard you wrong. Did you just say you would have 'made room in your schedule,' Your Highness?"

The prince's face instantly wrinkled in annoyance. Nonetheless, he swept back his messy golden hair, keeping his usual assertive tone as he said, "As I was saying, I would have accompanied her. I already gave up on our pre-wedding trip to the villa. Even you couldn't deny me a short trip with her, Alex."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alex's expression freeze over as his lips thinned. "It seems you don't understand your position, so allow me to enlighten you. Do you realize how many personnel I had to spare to make preparations for your frivolous, absurd pre-wedding trip? We had to set aside guards for your security, send people to make a careful inspection of the road all the way into the Gral Region, and send staff to check the village grounds and make sure everything was secure for your arrival. If you'd like, I can bring each and every one of them here so they can explain to you themselves all the trouble they went through for you. How's that?"

Unruffled, Prince Chris just kept his head held high as he quipped, "We could have traveled in disguise. That nickname everyone calls you by is really starting to fit—your head is as hard and stiff as a block of ice. Your migraines are only going to get worse if you can't learn to be a little more flexible."

I could almost hear the audible snap as veins started to bulge on Alex's forehead. Glen was off duty for the day, which meant the prince

had nowhere to redirect his anger.

Yep, I think it's about time for me to scram.

The ominous aura emanating from Alfred stopped me before I had the chance. He kept his meek mask on even as he said, "No. I hate to be blunt, but even if you had approached us beforehand, we would have rejected your request to accompany her. I am certain Eli would feel the same. After all, this trip is the last chance for her to spend time with her first love while she's still single." His lips stretched into a smile.

The prince and I both blurted out together, "What?"

Judging by the way Alex's face strained with tension, he'd already known about this.

The shock for the prince was unimaginable. I hadn't witnessed it myself personally, but I suspected his devastation now rivaled what he'd felt when Lady Elianna had suddenly returned the book he'd given her during the mess with Lady Irene.

"Eli's...first love?" His Highness eked out.

Seeing the way Alfred kept that smile plastered on his face, I wanted to fall to my knees in prayer and scream to the gods for salvation. *Please, Gods, don't let him pour any more salt on the wound! My fragile heart won't hold up!*

However, the person who landed the finishing blow on our future king was not Alfred. No, it was one of the prince's biggest archenemies—a scheming tanuki.

"Fred? Are you there?" The man who peeked his head in was none other than Marquess Bernstein himself. His eyes swept over the room, and he paused to blink. He was mild-mannered as he exchanged a few words over work matters with Alex and Alfred.

Once talk of official business was over, he turned a smile toward his son and said, "That concludes our work for the end of the year. Work we wouldn't have had if not for *someone's* selfish actions. Now we can catch up with Eli and Andrew and enjoy our time together as a family."

Alfred looked uneasy as he listened to his father's snide remarks about the prince.

Still, that lack of mercy was a trademark of the tanuki line. The marquess wore the same smile that he used against the prime minister, who'd suffered no small number of stomachaches under the thumb of the clever marquess all these years. Even as Prince Chris's face contorted in a look of pure rage, casting off the mask he usually wore in front of everyone, the tanuki remained unflinching. He exhibited the calm cunning his family was known for perfectly as he said, "Oh yes, Prince Christopher. If you'd like to postpone your wedding ceremony, we are prepared at any time. Don't hesitate to ask,

we'll be happy to oblige."

After giving the prince a verbal smackdown, the rotten tanuki turned to leave. Watching him go, I was reminded why the hidden name of the Bernstein family was so powerful (and yet terrifying).

Alex and I were both frozen in place. In the midst of it all, I'd lost my chance to escape. But the true killing blow came from Alfred, who reluctantly turned to me and said, "Alan?"

I looked up to find him flashing a gentle smile at me. Yet the words that came out of his mouth were anything but gentle, no matter how softly they were spoken.

"Eli's spending her break with her first love, not her immediate family. So please be sure to give all the money you took for those bets to the man who bet on her first love. He only just started at the palace this past spring and his wife just had triplets. Seems he's struggling financially, so I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

That was when I remembered...

After I'd finished my proud explanation of the details of the race and its contenders, one man had come to me, betting that Lady Elianna would spend her break with her "first love." The wording hadn't drawn my attention as I merely assumed her first love had been Prince Chris. I never dreamed it could be anyone else.

The way things would scale with a single winner taking the whole pot meant there'd be next to nothing left for me once I paid out. All of the joy I felt moments before drained out of me as a silent black cloud hung overhead. The race had been rigged, and I'd never suspected a thing.

My devastation at being deceived conflicted with the genuine empathy I felt for the newbie who had triplets to look after. Tearfully, I bid farewell to the custom-made lute I'd planned on buying.

Alex cradled his head in his hands, already feeling the biggest migraine this year coming on.

Judging by the anger smoldering in the prince's eyes, the new year had brought with it the demon lord's awakening.

Silently, I said a prayer.

I will never again make a bet against Sauslind's Brain. I, Alan Ferrera, swear it. So please, God, turn this demon lord into a kind hero instead. Bring peace to our palace! If you don't, I may not live to see tomorrow!



Afterword

Hello, it's me, Yui! As I'm writing this, it's mid-summer and temperatures are boiling hot, which is why I wanted to bring you a story set at the end of the year, in the middle of winter!

We're already on the third volume of *Bibliophile Princess*. Can you believe it? Even though I'm the one writing this series, I still can't shake the feeling that it's all just some sort of dream.

When I first set out to write a continuation to *Bibliophile Princess*, I had three separate types of stories in mind: one comedy, one serious, and one lovey-dovey. Fortunately, I already managed to fit the former two into the second volume. So when I was lucky enough to be approached for a third volume, I decided to deliver (what was my best attempt at) a lovey-dovey story. On the web novel version, the title for this arc was *The Pests*, but I changed that for the light novel serialization.

In this book, Elianna is forced to confront her romantic feelings, which she struggles with. Having our spacey, detached protagonist face romantic obstacles was but one of the two objectives that I had for this story. The other was for her to genuinely shed tears over her feelings for the prince, something I think is fairly commonplace in this type of fiction.

Looking back at volume one, Eli *did* fret over her feelings for the prince, but thanks to him wrapping things up so quickly (darn him!), it ended before she could cry over her love for him. I regretted not including that then, so I wanted to tie it into this story.

I was the leader and sole member of the "Make Eli Cry" group, which was all well and good...until, midway through posting the story, fans started emailing me and scolding me. (I admit, I got a few laughs out of it... *Ahem.*) Most of them were along the lines of, "Hey, don't bully Eli!" My friend was blunt when she told me, "I don't care how much you bully the men like Chris and Glen in the story (actually do it more, please), but don't you dare mess with Eli!"

I felt really blessed as an author to see how many people cared about Eli despite how big of an airhead she is and that there are lots of people that love her *for* that quality.

When my editor read the part where she cries, they commented, "So the Fairytale Princess has finally become human!" Which, um, made me wonder if I'd really managed to write Eli to seem that

otherworldly?

While Eli was forced to confront her romantic feelings, Chris was left to spin out of control. Or maybe it'd be more accurate to call him a wild animal on the loose? I had to rein myself in a bit with the way I wrote him. I was reminding myself, *Come on, he's a prince! What happened to that handsome, dazzling mask he always wears?!*

In the extra content (the short story I wrote for the light novel), I got to depict some of the struggles he went through in the past four years. It makes it a little more understandable why he's so unruly in the present day, I think.

...No, I'm sorry, that's just my bias as the author speaking. Maybe he really is just a thirsty prince? Lol

Well, his true struggles are only just beginning, so I hope you'll let him long for intimacy with Eli while he still has the leisure to do so.

This is going to be a bit of a tangent, but I want to talk about the Holy Night's Banquet. I am sure you all already have a picture in your head of what you think it looks like after reading the book. Personally, I picture what I saw in a photo album years ago: the UNESCO world heritage site, Grande Île in Strasbourg (Strasbourg Christmas market). In the picture, night was just beginning to fall and the whole plaza lit up like a jewelry box. I've carried the image with me ever since I first saw it, and that was the basis for the Holy Night's Banquet. After becoming an adult, I actually had an opportunity to go there. I savored the taste of the mulled wine as I stood there, chilled by the mid-winter cold. I'll never forget the flavor.

My own various experiences are reflected in my writing, but still, I find myself constantly vexed by how difficult it is to describe with words what I'm envisioning in my mind. Well, as they say, "Practice makes perfect." I seem to have a long journey ahead of me until I reach perfection, however.

And finally, I think it's time I bow down in worship at the feet of the following lovely people (this is starting to become a habit every volume).

Oh, great editor and purveyor of words! If thou were to beat me with a spiked whip or thrust me into the burning pits of hell, I could not resent thee! (Actually, I might enjoy it. Just kidding, of course!) Um, yes, so... The absolute hopeless excuse for an author that made her editor work even on their days off? That would be me.

I'm sure I also caused trouble for the other staff involved, aside from my editor, such as the proofreader as well as the illustrator (Sheena-sensei)... I hope they'll all forgive me for my great sin of getting a good night's sleep every night despite the stress I caused

them.

No, that one's not a joke, actually...

To the manager who let me work until the very, *very* last moment so I could be completely satisfied with what I was putting out: I could bow my head a thousand times in apology and it still wouldn't be enough. It was only thanks to their support and the support of all you readers that I was able to complete this book. Thank you all so much.

Despite being busy with other things, Sheena-sensei still graced this volume with countless beautiful illustrations. I loved them so much I actually framed the front cover illustration of Chris and Eli. I feel so grateful. Words can't even begin to express just how thankful I am.

I hope I wasn't the only one who burst out into laughter seeing the cunning tanuki reveal its true colors in the last two illustrations of the short story lol

Next, I would like to thank my (very benevolent) friend for putting up with me and listening to me moan and groan. Also, thank you to my family for all of their support.

And, of course, I would like to extend my gratitude to those of you who purchased this volume and read it. The reason a story like this, written by an amateur author like me, is so successful is because of all of you. As a way of thanking you, I'm working hard every day in hopes of improving my skills so that I can bring you more stories you can truly enjoy.

As the intense heat of summer continues, I hope you'll all take good care of yourselves. I also hope we'll meet again someday!

-Yui

Bonus Short Stories

The Mens' Dance - Glen's Lament

Now that I think back on it, it was at the start of autumn that my days of suffering first began.

"Please, I'm begging you, Commander Glen."

The sun had set on Sauslind's capital. At the behest of the other guards, I, Glen Eisenach, was being forced to adjust my usual schedule and accompany them on a nightly patrol.

As fall came to a close and winter began to creep in, the kingdom turned its attention to the upcoming Holy Night's Banquet. Anticipation was building because in just a few short months, the crown prince would be officially married. As a result, the noble ladies of the kingdom were even more enthusiastic about the Holy Night's Banquet than they had been in the past.

Not even I was spared from the influence of everyone's mounting excitement. It was customary for my mother to pester me every year, saying, "I would love a nice daughter-in-law, you know," but this year she'd redoubled her efforts.

Noble ladies of marriageable age, as well as their parents, kept a vigilant eye on me, looking for any opening in hopes of approaching me about an engagement. The pressure and intensity were akin to what one might feel on the battlefield. Despite how friendly and polite I acted when interacting with any woman, the situation was beginning to take its toll. I retreated to the barracks hoping for some solitude. It was then that this request fell into my lap, figuratively speaking.

"We have eyewitness accounts saying it keeps showing up in the northern wing. No one else wants to go out on patrol there now. Really, though, what an odd season for ghost stories to be floating around."

"I don't see why *I* have to be the one to do it," I groused.

"Lord Alexei said you had so much free time on your hands you would be the best person to investigate." The guard paused. "Uh, how about I treat you to a drink in the red light district afterward?"

I kept a disgruntled expression on my face as we made our way to the "haunted" part of the palace. When we arrived I suddenly felt dread welling up within me. I should've known what we'd find the moment I heard people's stories. A certain lab was located in the northern wing of the palace and a certain individual had been

frequenting the place for the past four years.

The room was pitch black inside, not a silhouette in sight, and yet we could hear the muffled sound of whispers.

“Is someone here?” One of the guards thrust their lantern forward, illuminating the area. The voices we’d heard moments before abruptly ceased.

The table in front of us was loaded down with a variety of research materials. There was a dried out, wound-up snake carcass and a jar filled with dead insects. It was gruesome enough that people avoided this place in broad daylight, but seeing it in the dead of night made it even more eerie.

The man at the front of our formation gulped and summoned his courage, taking a step forward. His foot had barely touched the ground when we spotted a head floating on top of the table. It was so dim in here that it was difficult to discern at first, but it was a girl’s head. She was so pale that her skin seemed to glow with a ghostly light. She showed no emotion on her face until she spotted us. Then, her lips seemed to peel back in what looked like...a grin?

My men shrieked at the top of their lungs and flung themselves at the exit. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched their retreat. I already had my sword out of its sheath as I stood there, steadying myself.

Two voices called out to me simultaneously. One belonged to the bodiless ghost of a young girl. “Lord Glen?”

“Oh, it’s Glen. What are you doing here?” The other was the carefree voice of our court’s master musician.

When I glanced back, I saw Alan peeking in from the corridor, a lantern in hand. “Tsk, tsk,” he clicked his tongue. “Lady Elianna, did you get ink all over you? You look like a ghostly floating head. It’s a bit terrifying.”

“After the researcher dropped his glasses, I started feeling around to help him search for them. Then I knocked into the table, and the ink spilled all over me.”

Apparently the headless ghost was none other than Lady Elianna. Looking closer, I realized her manservant and the researcher were standing nearby as well.

I breathed a sigh of relief as they filled me in on the details. It seemed they had come here to investigate the real identity of our phantom as well, and that was how they’d discovered the ink was luminescent. Then their lantern went out, and the researcher tripped and dropped their glasses. Alan left to retrieve some proper lighting, and in the meantime, Lady Elianna started fumbling around in the dark beneath the table, trying to find the man’s glasses.

I was almost impressed with how many ghost stories the prince’s betrothed managed to stir. But at least now that we knew the truth

behind our rumored specter, the case would be over. At least, that was what I'd naively assumed. Little did I know how wrong I was.

Days later, I realized how conspicuously the ladies' relentless obsession with me had tapered off without warning. As I puzzled over the reason for it, I soon learned ridiculous gossip about me was circling around the capital.

"Commander Glen Eisenach is being haunted by the disembodied head of a young girl," they whispered.

That was why the noble ladies refused to approach me.

Alexei praised me for it. "You certainly used a clever trick to ward them off."

I couldn't tell if he was being facetious or not. I wasn't even sure whether I should be pleased at the result or correct everyone's misconceptions.

I was an idiot for wasting time, wringing my hands and wondering, because shortly thereafter, my mother heard the news. She panicked, thinking her poor son might never find a partner at this rate, which led to the subsequent engagement talk between myself and a ten-year-old girl from abroad.

The Mens' Dance - Glen's Requiem

Someone must have cursed me this year. That was the only explanation for all my misfortune.

Thinking back, I hadn't had much time to rest since all the uproar this past spring. Ever since that cleared up and a certain noble lady became romantically involved with our prince, I thought the rest of His Highness's inner circle (including myself) might be rewarded with some peace in exchange for all the anxiety we'd suffered up until this point.

I was mistaken. If anything, our problems had multiplied in the aftermath. Still, I never dreamed I'd witness something as terrifying as what I saw today.

A fearsome silence had descended on the room, as if no living being within dared even breathe. No one spoke a word. They couldn't. Not unless they wanted to offer themselves up as the first sacrifice.

"...Glen."

Crap, of course it would be me! I screamed inwardly.

The man calling my name was the demon incarnate—or, as everyone else saw him, Sauslind's handsome prince. He turned his gaze toward me, undisplayed rage boiling within. I could almost feel the fumes from here.

"Finalize your engagement immediately and chase that meddlesome pest back to Miseral," he snarled.

“What?! Wait a...hold on! What does what Lady Elianna said have to do with my engagement?!” I howled at him. Moments ago, said lady had spoken a few explosive words and left us stupefied as she rushed out of the room. I couldn’t help resenting her for it.

Chris was being unusually open with his emotions as he glared at me. “As if there would be any other reason why she would do this! For Eli to say something like that means someone must have been feeding meaningless gossip to her!”

“That’s why I told you to talk to her! Don’t ask me to fix stuff for you when your desire to keep up appearances is what landed you in trouble in the first place!”

“I had my reasons.” He scowled. “Besides, this whole thing started because of you and all your trysts. Marry that little pest and drag her off with you to Miseral. You can live out the rest of your miserable existence there with her.”

“You’re being a tyrant, Chris!”

As the two of us snapped back and forth, Alexei sighed and cut in, “Your Highness, shouldn’t you follow after Lady Elianna?”

The prince jumped, snapping back to reality. He almost kicked his chair over as he went flying out the door.

My shoulders immediately sagged, as if haunted by—no, not going to use that word—riddled with exhaustion. I slumped forward on the table in front of me, face first.

As I recalled all the events that had occurred since the beginning of spring, I cursed the gods for my misfortune. The real clincher had been my possible engagement to that scrawny ten-year-old girl. Now I was reflecting on my life choices. I decided when the accursed new year came, I would abstain from my usual womanizing as much as possible.

So please, God, put an end to my agony. It’s not fair for me to be the number one sacrifice every time the demon lord descends.

God, I beg you...

That winter day, I made my desperate, sincere prayers to the gods.



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by Yui

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